THE QUESTION-ASKING BEHAVIOR OF FIVE CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: A CASE STUDY

A Thesis

by

YITING CHU

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2012

Major Subject: Curriculum and Instruction

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Lynne Walters
Committee Members,	Patricia Larke
	Robert Hall
Head of Department,	Yeping Li

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ABSTRACT

The Question-asking Behavior of Five Chinese International Students:

A Case Study. (May 2012)

Yiting Chu, B.A., Hubei University of Technology

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Lynne Walters

In the 2010/11 academic year, more than one fifth of international students in the American higher education institutions were from Mainland China. However, these Chinese students were often addressed by American professors as "passive listeners" or "inactive learners": they were quiet in the classroom and seldom asked question. In this paper, the investigator examined five Chinese graduate students in an American university on their experiences and perceptions on asking question in the American classrooms. A qualitative multiple case study was conducted with individual face-to-face interview as the major data collection instrument. The two research questions are: 1) What are the experiences of Chinese international students about asking questions in graduate level classes in the United States? 2) How do Chinese international graduate students feel about asking questions in the American classroom?

It was found that the major issues influenced the participants' question-asking behavior were: 1) English deficiency, 2) cultural differences between China and America, and 3) the different educational environment between these two countries. Specifically, the participants' motivation and opportunity to ask question in the

classroom was influenced by their belief that teacher should be respected, the value of question, and the Chinese concepts of thinking and speaking. The classroom environment in terms of the classroom behavior of American professors and other students also had impacts on the participants' question-asking behavior as an external contextual factor.

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations were offered for American faculty members and staffs working with international students and incoming Chinese students. This study might help American professors better understand the unique learning styles of their Chinese students and inform institution administrators to improve the services for international students. The results may also help Chinese students adapt to the American educational community smoothly. Suggestions for further study were also provided for researchers who were interested to increase international/ Chinese students' classroom participation.

DEDICATION

To my father and mother

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

Studying abroad is not a new phenomenon; rather, it has a history of thousands of years. During human history, many countries have been known as the major destinations for foreign students: Ancient Egypt, India, China, France, and Germany. Nowadays, it is the United States. Studies indicate that, after World War II, the United States has become and remains an especially appealing country for international students to pursue advanced education and career development (Hayhoe & Pan, 1996; Institute of International Education, 2011; Johnstone, 1986; McIntire & Willer, 1992).

While enriching the school diversity, the increasing portion of international students in American higher education institutions also presented challenges for both American faculty members and international students. It was found that American professors were rarely aware of the cultural differences among international students and had little experience supporting the learning experiences of these international students (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Trice, 2003). Similarly, for the international students, the high quality education of America didn't automatically lead to a successful study experience. For most international students, the challenges they

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This thesis follows the style of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

encountered were threefold: not only must they study in a foreign language they might not have mastered, but they also had to do so in a cultural and educational environment that was usually different to their own. These made the already demanding graduate study more stressful for these students. Studies indicated that international students, especially those from traditionally non-Western regions, experienced serious adaptation challenges and difficulties associated with English skills, cultural differences, academic stress, and social interaction (Bonk & Kim, 1998; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

According to the 2011 Open Doors Report, in the 2010/11 academic year, 723, 277 international students were enrolled in American colleges and universities (Institute of International Education, 2011). Among these international students, 157,558, or 21.8%, were from the Mainland China, which made China the major sending country of international students in the American higher education institutions (Institute of International Education, 2011). Approximately 50% of these Chinese international students were in graduate programs, while the rest were for undergraduate study and non-degree training (Institute of International Education, 2011). The majors that attract most Chinese students are natural sciences, engineering, and computer science and technology; while there is an increase in enrollment in humanities, social sciences, and liberal arts (Zhao, 2005).

Apart from the general problems faced by international students, Chinese students were often found to be quiet and reluctant to ask questions in the classroom (Klopf, 1997; Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1994; Wan, 2001; Yang, 1993; Zhou, Knoke, &

Skamoto, 2005). In the American classroom, the teaching and learning procedure is student-centric (Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2005). American students are expected to participate in the classroom activities orally by comments, arguments, and questions (Kim, 2002; Liu, 2002). By the standards of Western educators, question asked by students indicated their exploration of the knowledge (Morgenstern, 1992), effective learning (Biggs & Moore, 1993), and active thinking (Kim, 2002; Liu, 2002; Valiente, 2008). Therefore, these silent Chinese students were often addressed by professors in Western institutions as "passive listeners" or "inactive learners" (Biggs, 1996a; Cheng, 2000; Flowerdew, 1998; Liu, 2002; Valiente, 2008; Wilkinson & Olliver-Gray, 2006).

However, such interpretation from the perspective of Western education didn't take into account the tradition of Chinese education, or the Chinese students and teachers' expectations on each other. This generalization of Chinese students as "passive" also failed to investigate the unique learning styles and habits of Chinese students regarding classroom question under the context of Chinese culture.

Statement of problem

Although a great number of studies have been conducted to understand Chinese students' learning experiences and adaptation in the United States, a review of relevant literature suggested that few have focused solely upon their experiences and attitudes towards asking questions in the American classrooms.

The present study provided perspective on the issue by examining the perceptions and experiences of five Chinese international students in an American university. The study made a link between their current study in the American university

and their previous educational experiences in China. During this process, the investigator expected to find out what factors have affected their question-asking behavior in both Chinese and American classrooms as well as the effects that the perceived differences in cultural and educational backgrounds of two countries have on their attitudes and feelings about asking questions in the American classroom.

Previous studies on international students' adjustment in the United States usually investigated international or Asian students as a whole group, while failing to see the cultural and social diversities within the international student body. Other research studied the Chinese undergraduate and graduate students together and ignored the different educational experiences between these two sub-groups. This study focused exclusively on the Chinese graduate students because 1) nearly half of the Chinese students in America were in graduate programs and 2) it was believed that these graduate students' question-asking behavior in America was significantly influenced by their previous educational experiences, especially the college study in China.

In addition, many studies employed a study approach based on survey or questionnaire with predetermined close-ended questions and assumptions. Though having the advantages of large sample size and objective measurement, participants in such research were deprived of opportunities to describe their own experiences and perceptions. Considering the complexity of individual's learning style and classroom behavior, a narrative report of personal experiences would provide more reflective insights than merely general trends.

Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the Chinese students' attitudes and feelings about asking questions in the American graduate classes using a qualitative case study. Face-to-face individual interview was used as the major data collection instrument to understand the issues from the participants' own perspectives. The major factors accounting for their question-asking behaviors and the challenges they encountered were also discussed. Recommendations were provided for American institutions, professors, and incoming Chinese graduate students on encouraging Chinese students' motivation to ask question and participate more. Finally, suggestions were offered for future research.

Research questions

The following are the two research questions of this study:

1. What are the experiences of Chinese international students about asking questions in graduate level classes in the United States?
2. How do Chinese international graduate students feel about asking questions in the American classroom?

I focused on the following sub-questions:

1. What is the participants' frequency of asking question in the class?
2. Under what situations would the participants ask questions voluntarily in class?
3. What are the participants' attitudes towards asking questions and towards questions asked by their classmates?
4. What is the participants' preferred way to ask questions?
5. What factors have influenced participants' motivation and opportunity to ask questions in class?

Definition of terms

Adjustment: change of behavior in order to survive in a new environment and achieve a harmonious relationship with other individuals. In this study, adjustment and adaptation will be used interchangeably.

Case: a system bounded by time or place. It can be a person, an event, an activity or a program (Creswell, 1997).

Case study: "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (Creswell, 1997, p. 61).

Chinese students: students from Mainland China with a nonimmigrant visa in the United States. Students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau are not included in this definition for this thesis although they are all "Chinese students" as well. In this paper, this term will be used interchangeably with "Chinese international students" and "Chinese international graduate students".

Culture: "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the member of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9).

Question-asking Behavior: the oral expression of students in the class for the general purpose of requesting for information on learning. The general functions of questioning are clarification, confirmation, corroboration, seek facts and information, and refute.

Significance of the study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the Chinese international students' attitudes and feelings about asking questions during their graduate study in an American

university. The factors that affected participants' questioning behavior were identified and discussed from the perspectives of Chinese culture and education. Although the study results may not be generalized to Chinese graduate students in other American institutions, the findings could contribute to reduce the challenges and difficulties encountered by Chinese students in the United States and help the American universities and professors to understand their Chinese students and accommodate their learning experiences in the United States.

Specifically, the study results enriched the broad literature on the learning experiences of Chinese international students in the American universities by studying the under-explored field of Chinese students' question-asking behavior. Second, the identified factors that affected Chinese students' motivation and opportunity to ask questions in American classrooms bridged the research gap in this specific field. Third, from a practical standpoint, being aware of the differences in terms of cultural traditions and teaching and learning styles, incoming Chinese international students would find better ways to adjust to the American educational environment academic community smoothly. Finally, findings of this study would help American institutions and professors to create a more comfortable and supportive learning environment for these Chinese international students.

Organization of the thesis

This thesis was divided into six chapters. Chapter I provided a background, a statement of problem, research questions, an operational definition of terms, and significance of the study. Chapter II included the literature review on which this study

was based. Chapter III discussed the design of study, the sampling procedures, and the data collection and analysis. Chapter IV presented the findings of the study under the three identified themes. Chapter V contained a discussion of study results. Chapter VI included a brief summary of the study, the study conclusion, recommendations for Chinese students, American institutions and professors, and suggestions for future study.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review provided a context for the present study. The issue of asking questions is not only a linguistic issue, but also roots in a specific educational system that is influenced by the country's cultural and educational traditions. In the first section, Chinese students' question-asking behavior would be reviewed. The second part focused on the language problems associated with asking questions. The third section addressed the national cultural differences and their effects on schools and education. The last part explored the differences between Chinese and American education under the Confucian-Socratic framework.

Chinese students' question-asking behavior

Asking and answering question is one of the most important colloquial communications in Western classroom (Carner, 1963; Dillion, 1986; Gall, 1970). Students are encouraged to speak up in class to express their thoughts and ideas. According to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of zone of proximal development, asking questions helps the learners to challenge the limits of their current knowledge and explore the unknown domain. In order to ask a question, a learner has to first decide what is relevant to the study, then organize the knowledge, and last express the problem clearly (Mosher & Hornsby, 1966). That's why answering and asking questions are indispensable and dependent skills of students expected by the teachers (Wang, 1983).

Other studies also found that questions asked by students enhanced their learning motivation (Karabenick & Knapp, 1991), increased their communication with the teacher (Britzman, 1995; Pestel, 1997), and helped them to understand the learning materials and clarify doubts (Good, Slavings, Harel, & Emerson, 1987; Portin, 1993).

However, it was found that many Chinese international students in host countries were reluctant to ask question or participate in class discussion (Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Dougherty & Wall, 1991; Ho, 1991; Klopf, 1997; Wan, 2001; Yang, 1993; Zhou, Knoke, & Skamoto, 2005). For example, Holmes (2005) reported the Chinese students in New Zealand experienced considerable differences "in the contexts of asking and answering questions, giving opinions and expressing ideas…" (p. 306). A survey conducted among staff in an Australian university by Braddock, Roberts, Zheng, and Guzman (1995) also revealed that Asian students were more quiet and restrained in communication than Western students. Bond (1991) described a scenario in a Chinese classroom as the children "sit quietly, nearly arrayed in rows, following rote methods of learning, receiving explicit instruction in numbers, letter, and characters" (p. 12).

From the Western perspective, the lack of sound often equaled to the absence of communication, which was highly valued in Western classroom (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004). Thus, these quiet Chinese students often frustrated the Western instructors who were committed to the belief that asking question and other oral communication was essential to effective learning (Valiente, 2008). By the standards of Western educators, the silence of these Chinese students might reduce their chance to clarify concerns and made it difficult to effectively address their needs (Wilkinson &

Olliver-Gray, 2006). In addition, this silence among Chinese international students was often interpreted by Western educators as passiveness and reluctance, lack of personal opinion, laziness, and relying on instructors and textbooks (Ballard, 1996; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Flowerdew, 1998; Tsui, 1996; Wilkinson & Olliver-Gray, 2006).

Researchers investigated this lack of communication or silence among Chinese students from various perspectives. Sifianou (1997) speculated three factors that determined individuals' contribution to an interaction: the cultural norms, situational contexts, and the individual personality. Liu (2002) summarized five groups of factors that were related to students' silence in classroom after studying 20 Asian students from several East-Asian and Southeast-Asian countries, namely: cognitive factors, pedagogical factors, affective factors, sociocultural factors, and linguistic factors. Zhao (1995) found that Chinese students were reluctant to participate in the classroom discussions because they were fear of losing face, which was a central concept in Chinese interpersonal communication.

Many researchers tried to understand Chinese students' quietness and reluctance from the perspective of Chinese culture and its influences on Chinese education (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hofstede, 2001; Hu, 2002; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Kim, 2002; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). For example, Cortazzi and Jin (1996) surveyed 135 college students in China and found they didn't ask many question for various reasons: shyness, influences of Chinese traditions, fear of making mistakes, derision from classmates, ignorance of learning material, and not wanting to interrupt the lesson. Chinese students

typically worried whether their question would be appreciated by other students in the classroom and whether they would be laughed at by asking a simple or foolish question (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Pratt, Kelly, and Wong (1999) summarized four stages Chinese learners experienced towards learning: "memorization, understanding, application, and questioning or modifying what they have learned" (p. 253). In other words, by Chinese standards, memorization, repetition, and understanding were the prerequisite steps before asking question (Pratt, 1992). This was consistent with Cortazzi and Jin's (1996) findings that memorizing, repeating, and imitating were of central importance to Chinese children's early education. When Chinese students were expected to ask questions or make comments immediately on what they just learned in the class, they often felt unprepared due to the missing of prior stages. Kim (2002) compared the concept of speaking under the American and Asian pedagogical educational practices respectively and concluded that students' beliefs about the value of talking were different. In American education, students were expected to talk in class and express their personal ideas in order to demonstrate their understanding on the learning materials. This was generally based on the assumption that speaking was a good sign of thinking (Kim, 2002). This positive correlation between thinking and speaking, however, may not apply to the Chinese pedagogy where the quality of what was said outweighed the quantity or frequency of student speaking (Wilkinson & Olliver-Gray, 2006).

Stephens (1997), however, argued against the overgeneralization of Chinese students' communication difficulties as cultural problems and postulated language deficiency as a possible explanation. Liu (2002) also found the lack of adequate English

ability to express ideas effectively was usually addressed as one major reason caused Chinese students' silence in the classroom.

In sum, three factors were believed to have most significant impacts on the Chinese students' reluctance to ask question: English proficiency, cultural traditions, and learning styles influenced by the educational system of China. In the rest of this chapter, research related to these three issues would be reviewed in turn.

Language ability

Samovar and Porter (2004) found that language was the key to the heart of a culture. Therefore, it was necessary for international students to master the local language before they could adapt to the host country. A considerable amount of studies found that language problem was the top concern among international students who were second/ foreign language learners (Altbach & Wang, 1989; Boyer & Sedlacek, 1988; Coilingridge, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1998; Huang, 1997; Lin & Yi, 1997; Schram & Lauver, 1988; Tsui, 1996; Wang, 2004). It was found that students' perceived language ability had impacts on their self-confidence and comfort in the classroom (Coleman, 1997; Huang, 1997). The moderate language competence correlated positively with international students' confidence, which would in turn increase their social interaction with the host countries (Church, 1982; Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1966). Ballard (1987) found the language problem was the only one involved in the adaptation of international students. Wang (2004) also postulated that Asian students' abroad learning experiences could be best described as a series of challenges that were associated with the use of English.

Studies on international students' classroom behavior found that language competency had significant influence on international students' classroom participation (Coleman, 1997; Huang, 1997; Price, 1991). For example, Young (1990) and Price (1991) found that foreign students were reluctant to speak in class because they were afraid of making mistakes or awkward expressions. Tsui (1996) studied 38 Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and found that they generally attributed their Asian students' reticence to their low English proficiency and fear of making mistakes. Haydon (2003) also found a positive correlation between strong language skills and class participation among international students. Thus, in many cases, international students, who spoke a language other than English, were silenced in the American schools because of their poor English ability (Giroux, 1990).

Studies on Chinese international students also indicated that English deficiency was among their top obstacles (Chang, 1990; Kang, 1972; Liu, 1989; Lou, 1989; Lu, 2002; Wan, 2001; Wang, 2003). Liu (2002) studied the experiences of three Chinese international graduate students and found that poor English speaking ability and the established learning habits developed in China were the major factors accounted for their reluctance to participate orally in the American classroom. Apart from the general English deficiency, Chinese students were not familiar with the Western communication norms and the sociolinguistic rules in the American classroom (Portin, 1993; Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamoto, 2005). As Portin (1993) argued, American students have been trained to accept the sociolinguistic rules within the classrooms since elementary school;

while international students often lacked such opportunity to learn those culturally implicit rules. Therefore, they didn't know how to interrupt the professor for questions.

Standard English test scores were often required by the American institutions to evaluate the international applicants' English ability. A common problem, however, was that the institution administrators failed to realize the discrepancies between high English test scores and deficiencies in practical language ability (Coleman, 1997; Huntley, 1993). Wilkinson (2008) noticed that while Asian students could get high scores on Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), they could hardly speak English smoothly. For Chinese students, this is especially the case due to the examination-oriented English education in China (Cheng, 1998).

In 1978, the Chinese government initiated economic reforms and the "Open Door" policy to pursue economic development and modernization (Adamson, 1995; Wang, 1999). Under such context, English was viewed as an essential talent for students to learn the modern science and technology from well-developed Western countries (Cowan, Light, Mathews, & Tucker, 1979). By 1988, there were 50 million people in China engaged in English study, among which 80% were students (Cheng, 1988). Since 1986, all college students in China had to take mandatory English courses and pass the national College English Test-Level Four (CET-4); otherwise, they would not be eligible for a degree. Along with the increased economic involvement of China on the global market, learning English became an obsession for Chinese students (Wang, 1999).

However, the most popular English teaching in China was intensive reading which focused on grammar learning and literature reading (Bumaby & Sun, 1989). The

Chinese students learned only "examination English" but had extremely limited communicative ability. Wang (1999) described the general English class procedure as teacher explaining the grammar rules, analyzing the functions of words and phrases, and citing sentences to support the explanation. Therefore, the English education received by many Chinese students failed to prepare them to speak English in the academic settings in the English-speaking countries (Wang, 2003). This might partly explain why Chinese students were usually silent in the American classrooms.

Dimensions of national culture

In addition to the language problem, cultural differences were found to have significant influences on international students' learning experiences (Bennett, 1999; Cuban, 1989; Griggs & Dunn, 1989). The term "culture shock" has been in use since the 1960s when Oberg introduced it to codify the anxiety experienced in an unfamiliar cultural and social context (Oberg, 1960). Without sufficient prior cultural preparation or accommodation, international students' self-confidence and academic performance would be negatively affected due to the disempowerment from the host countries.

Hull (1978) studied 955 international students at three American institutions and found that their adjustment difficulty was positively related to the extent to which their home culture was different to the Americans. Sue and Kirk (1973) found that Chinese students had more difficulties in their adaptation to the American life due to their cultural backgrounds, traditions, and family influences. A study by Culha (1974) also confirmed that Chinese international students had a less satisfactory involvement with the American culture compared with students from Canada and Europe.

Hofstede's five-dimensional national culture

The notion of national culture was first proposed by Hofstede (2001) after studying the values of people from over fifty countries working in a large multinational company, IBM. He defined culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another" (Hofstede, 2001, p. 9) and identified four basic dimensions of national culture: power distance (small vs. large), collectivism vs. individualism, femininity vs. masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance (weak vs. strong).

Hofstede (2001) defined power distance as the extent to which the unequal distribution of power and the hierarchical social structure was expected and accepted by group members within the society. Individualism represented a society where the ties between individuals were loose and the supremacy of individual rights was upheld; people in individualist society were encouraged to express personal idea and follow internal wishes. Collectivism represented a society where people associated themselves with the group goal and valued group harmony. In such societies, people tended to behave in accordance with external group expectations and social norms. Masculine cultures valued the individual's competitiveness and assertiveness, while feminine societies emphasized the interpersonal relationship and concern for others. Uncertainty avoidance referred to the extent to which uncertain or unpredictable situations were avoided and the degree of tolerance for ambiguity and deviant behavior.

Hofstede and Bond (1988) later identified a fifth dimension, as long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation. Long-term orientation focused on promoting

virtues oriented towards future rewards, while short-term orientation focused on developing virtues related to the present and past. This fifth dimension was later renamed as Confucian dynamism because Bond discovered it through his study on peoples' value with a questionnaire composed by Eastern (Chinese) mind. Hofstede and Bond (1984) found that Asian cultures had a greater long-term orientation than the Western cultures.

These dimensions provided a very useful instrument to analyze individuals' culturally influenced values and behaviors in a stable and predictable way (Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996; Ting-Toomey, 1988). According to Hofstede (2001), Chinese culture was characterized as large power distance, high collectivism, femininity, moderate uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation; while the American culture was characterized by small power distance, high individualism, masculinity, weak uncertainty avoidance, and short-term orientation. In other words, if placed on continuum, the Chinese and American culture would be at the opposite polar ends (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Hui & Triandis, 1985).

The manifestation of national cultural characters on education

Hofstede (2001) analyzed the manifestation of these cultural characters in various settings, such as family, school, and workplace. The following is a summary of the cultural dimensions as reflected at school of each country:

The large power distance in Chinese school is reflected as the hierarchical teacher-student relationship: Chinese teachers are always respected and should never be criticized or challenged by their students. The teaching and learning process is teacher-

centric and students speak only when asked to by the teacher. In a collective society like China, students are treated as a whole group and the teacher's primary concern is to maintain the harmony of the class. Therefore, confrontation and disagreement is avoided or controlled. In the feminine Chinese culture, students do not want to be viewed as aggressive, and teachers' social skills and friendliness are highly valued. In China, the uncertainty avoidance is moderate and students expect to receive a clearly organized lecture with detailed explanation from their teacher. It such society, the teacher plays a vital role in students' learning, and the student's academic disagreement is usually viewed as personal disloyalty.

The power distance in American classrooms is small: the teacher-student relationship is equal. The teaching is student-centric and students are expected to ask questions and even criticize their teacher in public. In the individualist classroom, students are treated as individuals and open discussion even conflict are believed to be beneficial to the study. In a masculine culture like the United States, students compete openly with each other and express their personal ideas freely. The ideal teachers in such a society should be brilliant and academically competent. In a weak uncertainty avoidance country, there is a higher level of tolerance for unconventional opinions. Teachers are allowed to not know everything and student's disagreement to their teacher won't be viewed as personal but academic issue.

Hofstede (2001) found that people from a culture displaying large power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, high collectivism, and femininity were usually more resistant to change and experienced more difficulties adapting to cultures opposite

to their own. This was supported by Portin's (1993) finding that Chinese students were likely to insist on their accustomed routes to seek answers instead of raising question in class. Child and Markoczy (1993) found that people from large power distance cultures displayed high respect for authority. This was reflected as the hierarchical teacher-student relationship in China (Yang, Zheng, & Li, 2006; Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005) that featured student respect for teachers as authorities (Abubaker, 2008; Cortazzi & Jin, 1997; Huang & Brown, 2009). This large power distance in a Chinese school was also evidenced by the asymmetrical communicative patterns in Chinese classroom where students were expected to listen quietly (Holmes, 2005). Tweed and Lehman (2002) also found that students from large power distance culture were more likely to withhold questions.

In a collective society like China, maintaining the collective group values and interpersonal harmony were the basic rules and ultimate goals in the interpersonal communication (Pan, Chaffee, Chu, & Ju, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1994). Chinese teachers emphasized class discipline and delivery of essential knowledge due to the large class size (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Thus, unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese teachers tended to view the children as members of the group and emphasized obedience, consideration for others and conformity to the group, though they did recognize the diversity among students in terms of personal abilities and individual needs (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Chinese students were also accustomed to conforming to the group values and avoiding any behavior that would deviate from the social norms (Frank, Harvey, &

Verdun, 2000). As a result, Chinese students would avoid being singled out of the group by asking question in front of the class (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996).

It was also found that individuals from higher uncertainty avoidance cultures were more likely to focus on the negative consequences of their behavior and avoid risk-taking activities (Hofstede, 2001). On the contrary, members of lower uncertainty avoidance cultures were more likely to take risks and accept dissent (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Jaju, Kwak, and Zinkhan (2002) found that students from high uncertainty avoidance culture valued the knowledge and correct answers told by the teachers and expected a well-organized lecture. The uncertainty avoidance of Chinese culture was moderate, which implied that Chinese students were more likely to be assured by secure situations and preferred explicit rules and instructions to reduce the ambiguity (Hung & Hyun, 2010).

These dimensions, however, have not been without criticism, notably by Harrison and McKinnon (1999); McSweeney (2002); Redding (1994); Smith (2002); and Signorini, Wiesemes, and Murphy (2009). When Hofstede and his associates were developing these dimensions, they were limited to the certain context (IBM), time (1970s), and sample (the employees of IMB). Thus, these results might not be applicable to other people in other settings at a different time (Signorini et al, 2009). It would be also erroneous to assume that each member of a given culture was merely a mirror copy of their culture characteristics because few individuals had full access to the entire cultural heritage of their group (LeVine, 1986). Besides, individuals might negotiate with, and sometimes even reject, certain aspects of their cultures (Flanagan, Martinez, &

Cumsille, 2011; Goodnow, 2011). Therefore, these cultural dimensions and national cultural differences would be best viewed from a macro-level rather than a micro-level. Considering the significant cultural differences between China and America, Chinese international students were expected to encounter considerable adaptation problems associated with cultural transition in the United States.

Differences in educational environment

International students also experienced challenges related to the different educational environment and academic cultures between their home country and the host country. The country's basic philosophy and practice of education were influenced by its cultures, social contexts, and historical traditions (Bennett, 1999). Zheng (2000) found that the educational differences were accounted for by the cultural differences between nations. Thus, in addition to the general culture shock, international students may also experience "academic culture shock". Gilbert (2000) argued that academic culture shock was a subset of societal culture shock and was "a case of incongruent schemata about higher education in the students' home country and in the host country" (p.14). Culturally oriented research also indicated that members from same cultural group usually shared similar learning styles and habits (Li, 2011; Worthley, 1987). Since Chinese international students had finished most of their education in China, they would inevitably face academic culture shock as a result of the distinct educational systems in the two countries.

Chinese students encountered serious challenges and adaptation problems in American institutions because they came from an educational system and academic

culture that is fundamentally different from the Americans in terms of teaching and learning ideals and practices. For example, Zhai (2004) reported that students in his group found it harder to cope with the different academic demands than deal with the language problems. Although Chinese students were not homogeneous in educational backgrounds, they differed from Western learners on teacher-student relationship, learning strategies, and classroom behavior (Durkin, 2003; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Li, 2011; Li, Baker, & Marshall, 2002; Wilkinson & Kavan, 2003). Compared with American students, Chinese students also asked fewer questions in the class (Upton, 1989) and preferred listening to lecture and taking notes as the major learning methods (Barker, 1990; Huang, 2009).

Confucian-Socratic framework

Tweed and Lehman (2002) proposed a Confucian-Socratic framework to analyze the different learning patterns of culturally Chinese students and culturally Western students. Thus, the challenges experienced by Chinese international students in the United States reflected the mismatch between Confucian-oriented students and Socratic-oriented education system (Greenholtz, 2010; Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

According to Tweed and Lehman (2002), Socrates encouraged his students to generate knowledge and evaluate others' opinion by asking probing questions. He also believed that a teacher should teach nothing, but, rather, asks the right questions (Scollon, 1999; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). This was consistent with his metaphor for teacher as a midwife (Scollon, 1999). For Socrates, the purpose of learning was the justification for opinions by asking consecutively harder questions (Tweed & Lehman,

2002). Thus, the Socratic-oriented learning was achieved through "overt and private questioning expression of personal hypotheses and a desire for self-directed tasks" (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 93). On the contrary, Confucian-oriented learning was defined as "effort-focused conceptions of learning, pragmatic orientations to learning, and acceptance of behavioral reform as an academic goal" (Tweed & Lehman, 2002, p. 93). Confucius valued effortful and respectful learning, behavioral reform, and acquisition of essential knowledge (Ho, 2001; Hong, 2001; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). As a teacher, he viewed himself as a transmitter of knowledge and asked his students to respect the authorities and obey their words (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). For the purpose of education, Confucius emphasized the pragmatic acquisition of essential knowledge and believed the ultimate goal of education was to prepare administrative officials (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Unlike Socrates, reasoning or asking question was never among Confucius' primary concern (Scollon, 1999; Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

In the United States, though dramatic changes and reforms had been experienced in educational ideals and practices, the fundamental teaching methods remained consistent (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). The teacher-student dialogue in asking question, proposed by Socrates, became the tradition of Western education and prevailed in higher education in particular (Holmes, 2005; Scollon, 1999). The American educators believed that teaching and learning should be a mutual communication and students should have the opportunity to express their ideas through questioning and arguing (Scollon & Wong-Scollon, 1990). Similarly, in China, though Confucianism was undermined in the last century, the fundamental principles, such as student's deference to teacher and

acquisition of essential knowledge, remained influential on the modern Chinese society and learning practice (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Yao, 2000; Zhang & Harwood, 2002).

Four issues associated with asking questions could be examined under the Confucian-Socratic framework: teacher-student relationship, the roles of teacher, classroom behavior, and purpose of learning.

Teacher-student relationship

In China, the teacher was viewed as a mentor and master figure in both school and out of school contexts (Warden, Chen, & Caskey, 2005). Compared with the Western or American counterparties, Chinese teachers were authoritarian (Salili, 1996). This could be best illustrated by an old Chinese saying: *He who teaches you for one day should be respected as your father-like mentor in the rest of your life*; or literally, *Teacher for a day, father for life*. This respect-and-order-based teacher-student relationship was also observed in many other Asian countries influenced by the Confucian philosophy (Chen, 1999; Huang, 1997; Qian, 2002). This was sharply different from that of the America, where the teacher-student relationship was generally equal and intimate (Liberman, 1994; Upton, 1989).

This unequal teacher-student relationship might explain why Chinese students were often silent in the classroom: they were typically in awe of their teacher and didn't dare challenge the teacher (Biggs, 1996b; Ho, 1993). From the perspective of teacher, questions asked by a student might also be viewed as a doubt or challenge to his or her authority. For example, Nyquist and Wulff (1996) reported that some teaching assistants

from Confucius Heritage Culture (CHC) were uncomfortable to receive feedback from their undergraduate students. For them, only people who were superior to their position were credible sources of information (Bennett, 1999). Scollon and Scollon (1994) also found that questioning the teacher was not encouraged in the Confucian-oriented education, as asking question implied the incompetence of the teacher for not answering all questions properly.

The roles of the teacher

Ho (1993) and Biggs (1996b) found that under the influence of Confucius' educational thoughts, the teacher represented the absolute authority in the classroom and the teaching and learning was teacher-centered. Chinese educators believed that the teacher was the core of education and his competence accounted a lot for the student's learning achievement (1995). Chinese teachers were expected to guide the students through a step-by-step instruction and organize the learning materials to ensure students' mastery of the knowledge (Pratt, Kelly, & Wong, 1999). In the classroom, teachers were expected deliver a highly-organized lecture with detailed explanation and tell the students what would be going to appear in the test (Jaju, Kwak, & Zinkhan, 2002; Pratt, 1992; Pratt, Kelly, & Wong, 1999). In Cortazzi and Jin's (1996) survey on 135 college students in China, the profound knowledge of the teaching subject was found to be the most desirable character of a teacher, which was consistent with the Confucian-oriented education tradition that delivering knowledge was the primary role of a competent teacher.

In addition, Chinese students viewed the teacher as the only reliable source of knowledge and were not accustomed to casting doubt on his or her words (Jaju, Kwak, & Zinkhan, 2002; Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Pratt, Kelly, & Wong, 1999; Scollon & Scollon, 1994). Many researchers found that Chinese students were used to waiting for the teachers to tell them what to do and receiving correct answers from the teachers (Bennett, 1999; Huntley, 1993; Qian, 2002). When the Chinese international students found their American professors didn't do so, they usually felt upset or disappointed. For example, Huang (2005) studied 78 Chinese students in an American university and many of them complained that the professors failed to organize the lecture well and didn't follow the text strictly, which made them lost in the class.

Learning strategies

Learning strategies were defined as the "preferences that students have for think, relating to others, and for various classroom environment and experiences" (Grasha, 1990, p. 106). The learning strategies of a learner were usually relatively consistent, as they were influenced by the educational philosophies and academic cultures of the country where he or she came from (Bennett, 1999). Socratic-oriented learning valued the ability to reason and ask question, while Confucian-oriented learning emphasized the importance of effort and hard work (Li, 2002; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). Chinese students believed that hard working was the most important criterion for a good student and personal ability could be improved through constant hard work (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Therefore, the primary learning methods of Chinese students were listening to the

lecture, taking notes, and reviewing after class (Barker, 1990; Biggs & Moore, 1993; Huang, 2005, 2009; Valiente, 2008).

Regarding the classroom behavior, Chinese students preferred to listen and write instead of having oral interaction with the teacher (Barker, 1990). Huang (2009) found that Chinese students generally believed that the students' role in classroom was to listen to the lecture and take notes. In addition, they were trained since elementary school to be mentally active but verbally silent in the classroom, which was an illustration of respect and wisdom in Confucian-oriented education (Gudykunst, 2004; Hu, 2002; Valiente, 2008). This usually frustrated these Socratic-oriented American professors who believed that students should participate in the class through oral communication such as questions and comments (Huang, 2009; Upton, 1989). This again, showed the discrepancies between Confucian-oriented students and Socratic-oriented teachers.

Purpose of learning

Huang and Sisco (1994) found that Chinese international students in the United States were generally pragmatic in terms of thinking styles. This pragmatic feature reflected the Chinese perception of goal of education and the examination-oriented education system of China. Confucius believed that the goal of education was to prepare administrative officials and achieve personal development through behavioral reform (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

In Ancient China, education and taking the imperial examination (*ke ju*) was the only way for the poor to go up to the elite stratum. Yang and Wang (1999, as cited in Tsai, 2009) investigated the Chinese education system and concluded that Chinese

education was an examination education. In modern China, education was competitive in all level of schools and put much pressure on students' ability to pass the exams (Huang & Brown, 2009). This strong emphasis on examination within Chinese education has been found to be a barrier to students' creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving ability (Gao & Watkins, 2002). The pressure for higher scores pushed the teachers to focus exclusively on test preparation and left students little time to ask questions or discuss in the class (Luo & Wendel, 1999). Similarly, for students, asking question was never among their primary concerns since remembering the standard answers told by the teacher would achieve the largest input-output rate.

Chinese students learned for exams because examinations decided people's education, occupation, achievement, and destiny. Even today, the belief of "education changes fate" is still widely accepted among Chinese people (Cheng & Qi, 2006). For these students, when they attended a lecture, they more focused on comprehension and acquisition of knowledge, rather than asking question (Wang & Farmer, 2008). Cortazzi and Jin (1996, p. 186) described a conversation between a Chinese college student and her foreign teacher at the end of a semester:

Student: I've really enjoyed these classes, but what did I learn?

Teacher: You spoke every week.

Student: But what did I learn?

Teacher: You learned to speak!

Student: But what can I take home? I have nothing in my book, no notes, no grammar.

Teacher: But you can speak English now.

Student: Will that help me in the exam?

Though this conversation happened in the early 1990s, the underlying principle still applied to contemporary Chinese students: these take-home messages and essential knowledge that would be tested in exam were of students' central expectations to a course.

Summary

In conclusion, this literature review provided background of the present study and raised several questions essential to this study.

To date, much research has been done about the cross-cultural and academic adjustment of Chinese international students in terms of their academic study and daily lives in the United States. However, there is limited literature on their question-asking behavior and their feelings about asking questions in the American universities. Although many researchers found Chinese students were quiet or reluctant to ask questions, they rarely looked under the surface of reticence at the cultural and educational causes of this silence among Chinese students. Asking question involves with students' linguistic ability, cultural backgrounds, and previous educational experiences, which should be investigated from multiple perspectives. The present study would focus on explaining the perceptions of five Chinese international students regarding asking questions in the American graduate level classes and uncovering the factors that influenced their question-asking behavior from their own perspectives.

In addition, many studies on international and Chinese students' abroad learning experiences typically suggested that they should adjust to the American ways of teaching and learning, and be assimilated to the American educational environment. For example, the Chinese students' silence in the classroom was often interpreted as lack of motivation or passiveness by the standards of Western educators. I argued that this misunderstanding was due to the cultural ignorance among Western researchers and that American professors should appreciate this cultural diversity in human learning and enrich their teaching strategies to accommodate all students.

Finally, most previous empirical studies employed quantitative methods. Although quantitative approaches have the merits of mapping the major trends or features across group, participants were deprived of opportunity to interpret their ideas and feelings. This research used a qualitative approach with face-to-face interviews as major data collection instrument. Thus, it enabled the participants to describe their experiences and allowed the investigator to maximize information from the participants' own perspectives.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter discussed the methods employed by this study, including design of study, pilot study, sampling, data collection, and data analyses. A qualitative case study was used to explore the participants' graduate study experiences in terms of their attitudes and feelings about asking questions in the United States. Data were collected through individual face-to-face interviews during the semester of 2011 Fall.

Design of the study

This study aimed to investigate the Chinese international students' question-asking behavior in American graduate level classes. The purpose of the study was to describe and interpret the participants' experiences and feelings about asking questions from their own points of view. The investigator was interested in the participants' personal perceptions, the factors that affected their question-asking behavior, as well as the related difficulties and challenges. Therefore, this study employed a qualitative case study by studying five Chinese international graduate students through in-depth interviews. The following provided a rationale for the qualitative method and case study.

Rationale for a qualitative study

The two major research methods in educational study are qualitative study and quantitative study. In quantitative research, the investigators typically make several research hypotheses, control some independent variables, and measure the consequences on the dependent variables through statistical analyses (Creswell, 2003). In contrast,

qualitative researchers are interested to investigate and interpret the natural process, and draw attention to the perceptions and experiences of the participants (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000). The focus of the present study was the Chinese students' experiences and feelings about asking questions in the American graduate level classrooms, and the factors that accounted for their behaviors. Given the complexity of personal experiences, no predetermined assumption or hypothesis was made prior the data collection. Instead, the participants' experiences, feelings, and personal perceptions were of primary importance to the investigator. Therefore, a qualitative method was chosen to carry out the study.

Selection of case study

In this study, the research questions were general, broad, and open-ended. It was argued that such questions would be better answered and explained through case studies (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2008). Creswell (1997) defined case study as "an exploration of a 'bounded system' or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context" (p. 61). The case being studied could be a program, an event, an activity, and a person. Major sources of information include interviews, observations, documents, and media materials. The "context of the case involves situating the case within its setting, which may be a physical setting or the social, historical, and/or economic setting for the case" (Creswell, 1997, P. 61). Stake (2005) identified three types of case studies: an intrinsic case study focused on the uniqueness of the case itself; an instrumental case study focused on an issue or issues with the cases as instrument; and a collective or multiple case study

examined a number of cases to "investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition" (p. 445).

In the present study, the investigator was interested in the unique learning experiences of Chinese international graduate students in terms of their question-asking behavior in an American university. Thus, this study was a multiple case study. The studied issue was their experiences and feelings about asking questions in the American classrooms. The institution where the participants attended was the context, and interview was the major source of information. Five graduate students from China were selected as the cases of interest. Since generalizability was not the primary concern of a qualitative study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), the relatively smaller number of cases enabled the researchers to investigate each case in more depth (Creswell, 1997). In this study, the number was five, which was consistent with the suggestions of major qualitative study experts (for example, Creswell, 1997; Merriam, 2009).

Pilot study

Before the formal research, a pilot study was conducted to test the validity of the data collection instrument. Four Chinese graduate students from the same institution were interviewed. After completion of the first two interviews, some greetings and background questions were deleted from the interview protocol in order to control the interview to a reasonable length. The first two interviews lasted approximately one hour and a half. It was found that as the time passed, the participants tended to give shorter responses. Therefore, some trivial questions were removed into the correspondents before the interview. The sequence of some questions was reorganized, too, which

enabled the participants to answer the essential question in more detail. The fourth interview took about forty-five minutes, which was found to be an appropriate time for both the investigator and participant. In addition, some questions were rewritten several times to ensure they were direct and clear enough to the participants.

Data analysis was undertaken immediately after each interview. The pilot study results confirmed the previous impression that Chinese students typically asked few question in the classroom. It was also consistent with the reviewed literature that language deficiency, cultural differences, and differences in educational environment and learning styles might be the major factors accounted for Chinese students' question-asking behavior.

Sampling

The campus on which participants are selected is a Tier One university in the Southwestern United States. The university is located in a small town with a relatively homogeneous local population. The university offers degrees from bachelors to doctorates in over 150 fields of study and the majority (over 80%) of its students are residents of the state. By the semester of 2010 Fall, there were 1097 students from mainland China. In the 2010/11 academic year, this institution was among the top 25 institutions hosting international students (Institute of International Education, 2011).

Purposeful sampling and snowball technique were used to obtain potential participants. For the qualitative case study, purposeful sampling enabled the researchers to select a sample from which they could obtain rich insights to the interested problem (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). In this study, the investigator purposefully chose

students who could provide rich information and were willing to share their experiences and feelings into the studied phenomenon. During the pilot study, each participant was asked to refer the investigator to other information-rich students that might be interested to the study. The investigator made initial contacts with these potential participants by sending them an email (see Appendix A) explaining the purpose of this study and inviting their participation. Among the eleven students who responded to the invitation email, five were selected to be interviewed in this study. Some other criteria, explained below, were applied in the participant selection.

The participants were graduate students exclusively from Mainland China (People's Republic of China). This study did not include students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or Macau, though students from these regions were Chinese, too. The rationale is the social and educational contexts of these regions were different from those of Mainland China, which might have impacts on students' habits and feelings about asking question. There were three female and two male students, which attempted to reflect the differences between female and male students on this specific issue. In addition, the distribution of major was also considered. Three of them majored in Education, and the rest studied Engineering. The underlying logic was social sciences (represented by education) were more society and culture specific, while engineering was more universal (Huang, 2009). All five participants finished their undergraduate study in China and had stayed in the United States for at least two academic years by the time of the interview. This length of time enabled them to have a relatively comprehensive exposure to the American cultural and academic environment. Besides, it also allowed them to reflect on

what effects their previous educational experiences in China have had on their current study in the American university. Pseudonyms were used in this thesis.

The following table summarized the demographic information of each participant:

Table 1
Demographic information of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Major	Degree Level	Length (in month)
Nancy	Female	24	Industrial Engineering	M. S.	24
Mike	Male	24	Chemical Engineering	M. S.	24
Cindy	Female	25	Curriculum & Instruction	M. S.	36
Sharon	Female	29	English as a Second Language	Ph.D.	24
Randy	Male	27	English as a Second Language	Ph.D.	48

At the time of this study, Nancy was a Master of Science (MS) student majoring in Industrial Engineering. She was in her second year of graduate study. Mike was a MS student majoring in Chemical Engineering and was also in his second year of graduate study. Cindy was a Master of Arts (MA) student majoring Curriculum and Instruction. She was in her last year of study and was graduating shortly. Sharon was a second-year Ph.D. student majoring in English as a Second Language (ESL). She got a MA and worked as a college English teacher in China before coming to America. Lastly, Randy

was also a Ph.D. student in ESL. He got his MA in another American institution before coming to this university and was in his second year of doctoral study.

Data collection

Creswell (2003) suggested that individuals developed subjective meanings of their experiences as they engaged with the world, and that they made sense of their experiences based on their social and cultural perspectives. Since these experiences could neither be replicated nor observed directly by the researchers, interviewing was a necessary technique for the researchers to obtain interested information (Merriam, 2009).

Choice of data collection instrument

In this study, individual face-to-face in-depth interview was chosen as the major data collection instrument. Merriam (1998) suggested that one key concern in qualitative research was to understand the phenomenon of interest from the participants', rather than the investigator's, perspectives. Compared with questionnaires or surveys, people would provide more complete and detailed responses to the face-to-face interviews (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Therefore, the investigator felt that conducting face-to-face individual interview was the best way to maximize the information obtained from the participants and reduce the investigator's personal assumption or bias.

The interview was semi-structured, which was guided by a protocol (see Appendix B) consisting of a set of questions developed by the investigator and approved by his advisor. The questions in the interview protocol were generally broad and open-ended, which enabled the participants to reflect on the research issue from their own

points of view. The investigator was fully aware of the Chinese communication manner of indirectness. Thus, as the participants were introducing their experiences and responding to the questions, the investigator followed up with probing questions that would be more direct and specific to explore beyond the surface.

Although some general information was collected from all participants, the interview questions were generally used with a great flexibility. The general structure of each interview was similar, while the investigator adjusted the sequence and wording of some questions when needed. This open-ended and less structured feature allowed the investigator to respond to the specific situations and include new ideas emerged during the interview (Lichtman, 2006; Merriam, 2009).

The interview protocol as well as the thesis proposal was sent to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and the IRB approval form was obtained prior the formal research. All the questions were written in plain language and edited several times during and after the pilot study to ensure they were clear to the interviewees.

All interviews were conducted at the participants' choices of location and time, which allowed the participants to share their experiences in a comfortable environment. The typical locations were the participants' offices, study rooms at the library, and public study areas. At the beginning of each interview, the participant was given a consent form (please refer to Appendix C for a sample of the consent form). They were introduced the purpose of the study, explained the benefits and risks of participating in this study, and were informed clearly that their participation was totally voluntary and confidential. All the participants were assured that their responses would not be

associated with their names in any publication. All the participants fully understood that they were entitled to refuse answering any of the questions or withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequence. Each single interview took typically no more than 60 minutes, and 45 on average. The interviews were carried on in Mandarin and all participants agreed to audio tape the conversation. The interviews were then transcribed and translated into English by the investigator. All the transcripts and translations were sent back to the participants for the purpose of member-checking. They also offered me valuable feedback and comments on what I should cover or address in more details in the interview

Procedures of data collection

Five parts comprised the whole interview procedures. Before each interview, the investigator spent several minutes developing rapport with participants to alleviate any stress they might have had on talking about their experiences and create a relaxing atmosphere for both of us. At this time, they would also be asked to read and sign the consent form.

After the greeting and explanation of the consent form, the participants were asked some questions about their studies and any question or concern about the present study or the interview. However, any explanation of details or specific purpose of this research was avoided to prevent bias in participants' responses. At the end of the interview, the participants were told the specifics of the study and were asked for final comments or suggestions regarding the study or interview.

After that, background and demographic questions were asked to each participant. Then they were asked about their educational experiences at both Chinese and American institutions and their perceived differences on the cultural and academic environment between these two countries.

They would then be asked about their question-asking behavior and their attitudes and feelings about asking questions in both Chinese and American classrooms. Further exploration questions would be followed according to individual participant's responses to these questions. For example, if they identified the cultural tradition of China as the major reason influencing their question-asking behavior, they would be queried about what aspects of or how Chinese culture influenced their habits and feelings about asking questions in class. If they reported that their previous educational experiences in China had major influences on their question-asking behavior, they would be asked to explain the specific learning experience and/or describe a typical scenario of the class teaching and learning.

At last, they would be asked to provide recommendations to incoming Chinese students, American institution administrators, and American faculty members who were working with international students. They would also be invited to offer final comments and suggestions to the study.

During the real interviews, this schedule was not followed verbatim. Rather, the investigator might break the prescribed order of questions and add or omit some questions to cover the unpredictable information emerged from the interview.

Data analyses

In qualitative research, data collection and data analysis was usually a simultaneous process (Creswell, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 2009). Merriam (2009) identified two stages of data analysis in a multiple case study: within-case analysis and the cross-case analysis. Within-case analysis focused on mining information from the individual case and cross-case analysis involved putting cases together to abstract meaning across the cases (Merriam, 2009).

Therefore, in this study, data analyses started immediately after each interview and went in a dynamic pattern through the whole data collection procedure. During the interview, the investigator made every effort to not interfere the participants' responses with his personal beliefs or biases. In other words, the investigator didn't have any predetermined assumptions on what the answers of these questions would be or what information would be obtained.

The within-case analysis started when the interviews were transcribed and translated by the investigator. It began with mining information from each case and looking for phenomena and patterns that were important and unique to each participant. The key words and sentences were marked and labeled for possible categories. After analyzing and presenting individual cases, the next step was to seek patterns and themes shared by the participants, in other words, the cross-case analysis. During within-case analysis, many similar themes and factors had already emerged. As the interviews went on, themes that arose from the data were put together into categories to abstract meaning across cases (Merriam, 2009). These categories served as the starting point for data

analysis and were revised as new information was added. Within each category, original words were listed for quoting. The general guideline was to pick up the similar ideas and issues more frequently mentioned by the interviewees and discard these trivial ones.

Three major themes were finally identified through data analysis that might affect participants' attitudes and feelings about asking questions: English deficiency, cultural differences between China and America, and challenge associated with different educational environment between the two countries. These were consistent with the findings of the literature review. However, they didn't confine the investigator's exploration on alternative explanations that were not covered in the previous studies. For instance, all five participants mentioned that the easy and relaxing atmosphere of American classroom had a positive influence on their motivation to ask questions in class: they were comfortable under such an environment and were more willing to ask questions voluntarily. This finding was not addressed in the literature review, but it was shared by all five participants and enriched the current literature. After the themes were determined, they were revised and enriched as new information was found in the consequent interviews.

Limitations

Some limitations might affect the validity of the results of this study. First, as a qualitative study based on participants' narrative reports, the validity of this study relied on participants' honest responses to the interview questions. This was a fundamental assumption of the research design. Since the Chinese students were very sensitive to

their public image, they might not always feel free to share their true experiences or feelings.

Second, given the fact that both the investigator and participants were Chinese, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin and then translated into English by the investigator. Though all transcripts and translations were sent back to the participants for the purpose of member-checking, the English translation might not exactly convey what participants were meant to express.

Finally, since the investigator was the one who designed the entire study and interview questions, his personal biases or assumptions as a Chinese international graduate student might not be completely eliminated, which might have had effects on the participants' responses, as well as the interpretation of the results.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to address how this research was designed and to provide a description on how it was conducted. A qualitative approach was employed to explore the Chinese international graduate students' attitudes and feelings about asking questions in an American university. Since the investigator was interested in the participants' descriptive accounts of their personal learning experiences, a multiple case study was used to obtain the first-hand information.

Individual in-depth interview was chosen as the major data collection instrument because it enabled the participants to share their experiences and perceptions from their own perspectives. A protocol was developed prior to the study and approved by the IRB to guide the interview. A total of eleven students were referred to for this study and five

information-rich participants were selected and interviewed face-to-face individually. The interviews were carried out in Mandarin and audiotaped with the permission of each participant. The interviews were then transcribed and translated into English by the investigator.

Data analysis started immediately after each interview. The single cases were analyzed first and then were put under a group of themes that emerged during the data analysis. In the next chapter, the findings of the data analysis would be presented in the light of the research questions.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The present study aimed to investigate how five Chinese international students in a Southwest American university described and interpreted their experiences about asking questions in their graduate level classes. The investigator was interested to know their attitudes and feelings about asking questions and the factors that accounted for their question-asking behavior. A qualitative case study was conducted with individual face-to-face interview as the primary data collection instrument. The participants' responses were audio taped and then transcribed and translated into English by the investigator. Data analysis followed immediately after the completion of each interview. Each case was analyzed first with a focus on the phenomenon and characteristics unique to the specific participant. Then cross-case analysis was conducted with all the cases examined together in order to find the concurrent themes across the cases. The research questions were:

1. What are the experiences of Chinese international students about asking questions in graduate level classes in the United States?
2. How do Chinese international graduate students feel about asking questions in the American classroom?

This chapter reported the participants' description and interpretation of their habits and feelings about asking question. The English problem and the challenges associated with different cultural and educational backgrounds between China and America were identified as the major factors that influenced the participants' motivation and opportunity to ask question in the American classrooms. In the rest of this chapter, the general characteristics of participants' question-asking behavior as well as the three identified factors would be summarized.

Characteristics of participants' question-asking behavior

For Chinese students, the best chance for academic development was always the primary concern when they determined to pursue an advanced education in another country. All the five participants reported that they chose to pursue a graduate degree in the United States because of the America's reputation of high quality education. When the Chinese students entered the American schools, they confronted the American educational environment and academic cultures. As a result, they had to understand the American professors' expectations and learn the American classroom behavior. Some of these expectations and norms might be foreign to them and even contradicted with their previous beliefs and experiences. Unfortunately, for many Chinese students, asking question was one of these foreign rules.

In the following section, the participants' experiences and feelings about asking questions found in the interviews were summarized under the themes emerged from the data analysis. Excerpts of the participants were used to illustrate their perception and interpretation. Direct quotes were used as they occurred in the interviews to allow their

voices to be heard while some repetition of words and breaks of the conversation were removed. In the interviews, the participants were asked their previous and current learning experiences in China and America regarding asking questions. It should be noticed that these experiences were not meant to compare the educational ideas about asking question between China and America. Rather, they were used in this paper to provide contextual information about how the participants developed certain attitudes and behavioral patterns and how these experiences influenced their question-asking behavior in the American classrooms.

1. The participants generally asked few question in the class.

The participants reported that they asked much fewer questions compared with American students and international students from other regions. This result was consistent with previous studies on Chinese students' question-asking behavior. As stated by Mike: "When I was in college, I asked relatively more questions in the class compared with my classmates. But in general, we rarely asked questions, although the professor kept encouraging us to do so. Here (in America), in general the Chinese students were silent; more active than we were in China though." Nancy reported that: "There are a couple of Chinese students talking frequently in class, but still much less than the Americans." Sharon noticed that: "Not only the Chinese students, but generally students from Asian countries are less likely to ask question in the class. The international students from other countries are better." She added: "For me, I don't ask a lot either." Cindy also explained her situation: "As far as I remember, none of my teachers (in China) encouraged us to ask questions; we seldom asked, either. This is just

the classical form of Chinese class: teacher teaches and students listen. The teachers would specify somebody to answer questions but no one asked questions to them. For me, this (asking question in class) is a totally new experience after I came to the United States."

The situation, however, was slightly different for Randy, who had stayed in the United States for four years. He reported: "When I was in college, I asked a lot of questions. I still ask more questions than other Chinese students now. Of course, compared with the Americans, my questions are much fewer."

2. The participants were very cautious about asking questions.

When the participants were about to ask a question, they were usually very cautious about it. They typically worried about if their question was valuable enough to ask. For example, Cindy said: "When I was going to ask a question, I would consider if my question would contribute to the class discussion or would be helpful for other students. Besides, I always thought over my questions very carefully to prevent any mistake." Nancy also said: " (During the lecture) I took much time to think about what the professor said and consider whether my question was really worth asking; because in my opinion, if you paid enough attention to the lecture, you wouldn't have any to ask."

Sharon shared the same concern on the value of question. She explained that: "…because after a second thought, you would often find your question was in fact valueless and not worthy to be asked." Mike attributed his caution on asking question to his previous educational experiences: "In China, if your question was too simple, you would be laughed at by your classmates and teacher. Well, of course, they would not

ridicule you on face; but you still could perceive the contempt. The teacher would also imply that your question was too simple to ask. Therefore, when I was not sure whether my question was valuable or not, I simply chose to withhold it." For Randy, he admitted that he also had that concern at the first several years, though he wouldn't take it seriously now.

3. The participants preferred to ask question after class.

The participants reported that they preferred rather to ask the professor for help after class than to raise the question directly during the lecture. This was partly due to their introverted personality. As stated by Nancy: "If I had a question, I'd rather ask the professor after class. Some people might like to show off in the class, but I am not comfortable to speak in public." Cindy attributed this preference to the learning habit accumulated in her previous education in China: "In China, we were not supposed to interrupt the teacher for questions in the middle of the class. If you had one, you had to wait until the class was over. So, it just became a habit, a style for our Chinese students."

Sharon shared her experience as both a teacher and a student. She observed that: "If (Chinese) students have a question, they may not ask (during the lecture); but they will absolutely ask after the class." Mike also preferred to ask the professor for questions after class, but he had his own explanation: "In China, there were few people asking questions during the lecture; but when the class was over, they would go to check with the professor and ask questions. Generally, I prefer to talk with the professor individually after class, too. (During the lecture) the professors had to manage the pace

of instruction; when the class was over, they would have more time to answer my questions in detail. Well, the other reason is I am shy."

4. The classroom atmosphere influenced participants' question-asking behavior

It was revealed that the participants' motivation to raise question was also influenced by the general educational environment as well as the specific classroom atmosphere. The participants finished most of their education in China before coming to the United States. When they studied in an American university, they all perceived the different classroom atmosphere of America. Randy commented: "In the American classrooms, the professors expect the students to raise questions or challenge their ideas. It is a general rule and this (asking question) is their (American students) way to participate in the class. It is shared by each party of the class, like an unconscious atmosphere."

Other participants also agreed that the open and active atmosphere of American classroom made it easier for them to speak up or raise question in class. For example, Mike reported: "Honestly, the Chinese students are still silent, but they are more active than they were in China. When the overall atmosphere is active, even the shyest ones would not be afraid (of asking question). This is exactly the power of positive implication." Cindy also believed that the easy and relaxing classroom atmosphere promoted her to ask question spontaneously. As she said: "… (In the United States), the classroom atmosphere is also easy and less pressured. In such situation, I would not have much hesitation and felt free to ask questions. This atmosphere is very important. It makes you feel that it (asking question) is absolutely normal here."

In general, the participants had rather complicated feelings about asking questions. On one hand, they agreed that asking question was important to learning and appreciated this type of classroom interaction between teacher and student. On the other hand, they didn't ask many questions and asking questions was not among their primary learning methods, either. In addition, when asked to describe their overall feeling about asking questions and the questions asked by their classmates, they displayed a cautious attitude. It was found that the participants typically had rather high expectations of graduate studies in the United States---this was exactly why they traveled tens of thousands of miles from their homeland to another country. They anticipated well-organized lectures, clear teaching objectives, detailed instruction, and comprehensive explanation. Surely these were all criteria of a good course in China. Therefore, by their standards, the extensive student participation represented by student question emphasized by the American education in fact broke the class organization and failed their expectations to some extent. This could be best illustrated by Sharon's comments:

> In my opinion, classroom discussion is desirable and students could learn more via discussing and asking questions. Students should ask question and have to ask question. However, asking question alone won't necessarily lead to positive results. It is the teacher's feedback and evaluation that make it different. Many times, the American students asked too many trivial or irrelevant questions and deviated from the class topic. This made the class disorganized if the professor failed to rectify or interfere in time. Frankly speaking, I learned little from my classmates' questions and comments. Surely there were some valuable

fragmentary thoughts or piece of ideas during the class; but at the end of the semester, I felt I learned little from the course and didn't get the big picture.

During the interviews, three factors were identified that have influenced the participants' question-asking behavior: English deficiency, cultural differences, and differences in educational environment and academic culture. In the next section, these three issues would be presented.

English deficiency

The finding that participants identified English deficiency as a big challenge associated with asking questions was not unexpected. Previous studies indicated that the English problem was the top difficulty encountered by international students who were not native English speakers. For example, Nancy said: "I think for most international students, including Chinese students, English problem is the top challenge." Mike also stated that: "Sometimes, I wanted to ask the professor for clarification or explanation during the lecture; but I was not sure if I could describe my question clearly or translate it into English accurately. This was a major factor that prevented me from asking more questions."

Translation from Mandarin to English

It was found that the participants typically needed a step of translation from Mandarin to English when they were about to ask a question, which seriously inhibited their motivation and opportunity to ask questions. As explained by Nancy: "(When you were about to ask a question) the first step was to locate the problem; then you had to make sure you could express it clearly in your native language; and finally, you had to

translate it into English. This was the biggest challenge for me. It is hard for international students to think directly in English without such a translation process." This translation process, however, usually cost their turn to ask the question. As explained by Cindy: "It took me time to think and translate my words into English, but the lecture and discussion moved too fast to let me do so. As a result, I had no choice but being silent."

After spending five years in America, Randy still needs this translation procedure. As he said: "I would think about the question first in Chinese, then organize my language (in English)…after all, (in order to ask questions) you have to be able to speak English." Even for Sharon, who was a college English lecturer in China, English was still a problem. She reported: "Well, I could ask question. However, if I was not 100% sure I could express it correctly and clearly, I probably would not ask it, unless I was extremely interested in this problem. I would make the decision quickly. After all, you don't have to translate every word (to know that): you know your English ability. When you are considering the question, you would know if you are able to ask it in English clearly."

English test and English learning

The findings also suggested that the standard English test scores required by the American institutions, such as TOEFL and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) were not necessarily indicative of the linguistic competence of the participants, nor of their abilities to communicate in the academic settings. This was indicated by the fact that the participants experienced English problem to some extent,

though they performed fairly well on these tests, As Randy explained: "TOEFL test cannot stimulate the authentic context, though it has been improved on its topics and forms during the past decades…because, as a widely-used standard English test, it requires the test-takers to respond in an extremely short time to a computer. This is by no means similar to the real daily conversation." This was consistent with Wilkinson's (2008) finding that while Asian students could get high scores on TOEFL, they could hardly speak English smoothly.

The participants generally attributed their limited English ability to the English education they received in China. As said by Cindy: "In China, the English education didn't pay much attention on spoken English. Besides, our linguistic environment was limited, too. We didn't have much chance to speak English." Mike also recalled the spoken English course he took in college: "That was really funny. You know, the course was oral English and we used the classical text: *Family Album, U.S.A.* We watched the videos and then answered the questions, in English. But can you imagine how we were tested? In the test, we didn't have to speak a word but were asked to answer a set of multiple-choice questions based on the plot. That's ridiculous."

The examination-driven English education also pushed the English teachers to organize their teaching plan around the test preparation while any teaching activities that would not directly contribute to the examination were regarded as a waste of time. Similarly, in order to pass the test and go to the key schools, students had to devote all effort exclusively on listening, reading, and writing, which were the tested content. As Nancy recalled, when she was in middle school, the English classes were all about

memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules as well as reciting passages from the textbooks. The spoken English ability, as a result, was sacrificed because it was not tested.

Differences among five participants

Although English deficiency was a problem for all five participants, its impact on each participant varied by their majors. Nancy was a student in Industrial Engineering and she reported: "In my program, lecturing is the main form of class, which is no different from my undergraduate study in China. Generally we don't have much class discussion or student question. So, it (asking question) is hardly a problem for me." Mike majored in Chemical Engineering and he also agreed that asking question was not common in his courses. As he explained: "This type (students who ask questions and discuss in the class) is the minority in my department and most of my courses are in the form of lecture. I think this is related to the different fields of study." For them, not asking question would not be a big problem and would not be atypical from the rest of the class.

In contrast, the other three participants, who were in Education programs, reported that they had many courses in the form of semi-seminar calling for extensive student question and other forms of oral participation. In these courses, they were expected to ask questions and make comments on others' questions. As a result, their disadvantage in English skills became a more serious problem. As explained by Cindy: "Besides, most Chinese international students are majoring in natural sciences and engineering. They could demonstrate their talent and ability in assignment, project, and

lab work. But our major is special. The language is your major challenge. You can't tell you are competitive if you have language problem. (Because) It is directly related to your academic performance." In other words, the English deficiency not only reduced their opportunity to ask question, but implied their academic incompetency.

In sum, the participants' caution or reluctance on asking questions was understandable considering their disadvantage in English language. This language anxiety became stronger when contrasted with the fluent native English speakers, mainly American students. Cindy commented: "Sometimes, I did have my thoughts, but I knew I was disadvantaged in language compared with the American students. I could perceive this contrast. So I'd rather say nothing. Therefore, I would be more cautious when I was about to ask a question. I knew they were tolerant, but this distinct contrast still made me feel bad. You know, it reminded you that your English was bad and you were showing your shortcoming." For these participants, in addition to their educational backgrounds, the most direct perceivable difference between them and the American students was English ability. As second language learners, it was natural for them to show caution with their English expression to prevent any embarrassment.

Differences in national cultures

The participants agreed that Chinese culture was one major source that shaped their habits and feelings about asking question. Their question-asking behavior was found to be greatly influenced by the large power distance, uncertainty avoidance, the collectivism, and the feminine character of Chinese culture.

Power distance

Hierarchical teacher-student relationship

The power distance in Chinese culture was large (Hofstede, 2001). In education, the large power distance is reflected in student respect and hierarchical teacher-student relationship. However, the power distance in American schools was small, reflected as the relatively equal teacher-student relationship. The participants talked about the perceived different power distances in China and America. For example, Mike said: " (In China) those people who are above you in the social status usually make you feel pressured and stressful. You just feel that they are aloof above the earth and even 'unreal' to some extent. Our Chinese culture values the hierarchies, such as the relationship between teacher and students. The position between teacher and student is distant and unequal. I don't think the teacher-student relationship is supposed to be like that and it should be more relaxing. I have a feeling that the Americans value the equality between people."

This hierarchal relationship between teacher and student kept them in a relatively large distance in classroom and prevented any offense, including asking questions. Sharon shared her experience: "In China, it was regarded as disrespectful if a student asked a question that might baffle the teacher. But generally the American teachers welcome any doubt or disagreement. They are willing to discuss with their students in an equal position." Cindy also reported: "In China, the image of teacher is always authoritative. This is rooted in the educational tradition of China. Even today, students are not supposed to question their teacher's authority. Whatever the teacher says should

be right. Well, this belief has been under criticism recently, though." Mike added: "In general, in my experience, Chinese students are afraid of talking to the teachers or asking questions." Nancy also recalled: "In China, the position between teacher and student is not equal. So, when you are communicating with the teacher, you always have some concerns. However, in the United States, I feel the teacher-student relationship is not unequal and the communication between teacher and student is also informal." This distant teacher-student relationship in Chinese classroom might explain why Chinese students seldom asked question spontaneously.

The hierarchy of question

Another phenomenon associated with the power distance was the level of question, which was frequently mentioned by the participants during the interviews. As noticed above, the participants were very cautious about their questions. This caution was in part due to their perceived limited oral English skills, as summarized above. In addition, they also worried if their questions would be too simple, or literally, low level to be asked. In practice, they would try every effort to avoid asking any low level question. For example, Mike said when he was about to ask a question, he would keep reminding himself not to raise a simple one because "if you did so, people would think you were stupid or just didn't study well. When it happened several times, you would gradually lose your confidence and were reluctant to ask any more." Then he explained the reasons: "We Chinese people just like to rank things into hierarchies. Everything is placed in a hierarchy relative to others. This hierarchy is not limited to the social status, such as the relationship between teacher and students. It applies to the questions, too. If

you asked a question that no one knew the answer, people would think you were good; otherwise, you would be laughed at. I think for the Americans, they won't even bother to consider that. They won't have such thought that your question is higher than mine. I think this also reflects the equal spirit valued by the American culture." That's why the participants would spend considerable time thinking about their question before raising their hands.

This belief on level of question was also reflected in their comments on questions asked by their classmates. Sharon commented: "The American professors generally encourage students to ask questions because they believe your questions indicate your interests and thoughts. But in my opinion, asking question is not the purpose. For me, I think students should raise valuable questions after deliberate thinking. Admittedly, this type of question is high leveled. A student may have to ask some low level questions before he or she could ask high level ones. Now as a student, I feel some of my American classmates' questions are silly. However, when I was a teacher, I also hoped my students would ask questions and I appreciated all levels of question asked by my students." Similarly, Randy also said although he appreciated the questions asked by his classmates, he "rarely found any high-leveled questions asked by the Americans."

However, it should be noticed that, the participants stressed that they generally would not judge if someone else asked a simple question. Their only concern was that they might be judged by others once they asked a straightforward one. As explained by Mike: "If someone in class asked a simple question, my first impression would be: 'Well, this is an easy one, I can answer it.' I would not think he or she was stupid or

what. However, I can't help worrying if I asked one like that, others would think I am stupid." Nancy also reported: "Personally, I found most of my classmates' questions were valuable. I was always inspired by these questions. But, I just hope my question would enrich the discussion or offer some inspiring ideas. The fact is, your concern would not always be meaningful for others. They (her classmates) might not care, but I did." In other words, though the participants did have the concept of level of question in mind, they simply applied this rule to their own questions in most cases.

Uncertainty avoidance

The participants' concern for their English ability and caution on the level of their questions were also consistent with the Chinese culture's character of moderate uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001). In order to prevent any negative consequence due to poor English, they usually thought over their questions several times to avoid awkward expression or grammar mistake. When Chinese students were unsure if they would make their points clearly in English, they would simply not run the risk. This could explain why English deficiency became a serious barrier to their motivation to ask questions. Moreover, they were not always sure whether their question was too simple to be asked. They often tended to overthink the negative consequence, for example, derision from the classmates, and didn't dare to take the risk to ask a seemingly simple question.

In addition, this safety-seeking tendency was also reflected in their expectations of the teacher and class. Chinese students viewed the teacher as the secure source of knowledge and expected to receive correct answers from the teacher through well-

organized lectures. For example, Mike reported that: “I think teacher plays important roles in a course, because in China, the teacher has the ultimate power of interpretation of the learning materials, assignments, and exams.” Sharon also believed that the professors should control the lecture and guide the direction of class discussion. She added that: “In China, a teacher has to answer students’ questions correctly. Otherwise, he or she would lose the authority and respect. But the American teachers have a different attitude: they don’t think they have to know everything.”

Thus, for the participants, too many student questions violated the authority of the teacher, and also broke the inherent structure of the class, which in turn, broke the certain situation with which they were comfortable. As stated by Sharon: “I believe the professor should have a clear plan of the course, including the covered content, the purpose of teaching, and key concepts and theories. The professor has to have a specific goal on every class: what is going to do in today’s lesson? There could be discussion or student question, but these should be all under the frame.” Nancy also stated that she preferred the form of lecture because “I think it would help me to master the knowledge and skills more effectively. After all, you have to understand first before you can ask question or discuss with others.” Though she said it in a rather restricted tone, she actually expressed her disagreement with the extensive student questioning in the American classroom.

The emphasis of student participation in the American classroom revealed that, in the United States, both teacher and students had a high tolerance for uncertain situations and disagreement with each other. American students were used to

questioning and challenging their teachers constantly during the lecture. To the American teachers, this question or doubt from the students was merely a normal part of the teaching and learning process. However, in China, the same behavior might have very different and serious consequences. As explained by Randy: "The Chinese teachers are always powerful, or forceful. You are not allowed to ask questions. Well, not exactly 'not allowed', but the thing is, the standard answers are on their hands. We believe their explanation is the authoritative. So, if you disagreed with the teacher, you would simply perform badly on the tests." This indicated the different levels of tolerance for uncertainty between Chinese culture and American culture.

Collectivism of Chinese students

During the interviews, the participants frequently used the phrases like "we did", "we Chinese were" or "our style", though they were referring to their personal experiences. These expressions indicated that the participants tended to view themselves as representatives of the Chinese people and had a strong sense of group identity. This was consistent with Hofstede's (2001) analysis that Chinese culture was highly collective. The Chinese people were likely to conform to the group and prevent any behavior that would deviate from the collective social norms. As stated by Randy: "Our traditional culture doesn't uphold individualism, we value the collectivism. Thus, nobody wants to be the person stands out of the crowd. We decide our own behavior by looking at how others behave. "

Going with the flow

High collectivism almost always went along with high uncertainty avoidance because risk will be avoided to the maximum extent when people just follow the social norms and do whatever others do. This was confirmed by Nancy's comments: "We had huge class sizes since primary school and most of my classmates didn't ask any question in class. So, I just did as the others did." Cindy also reported that: "We Chinese students are not used to interrupting the teacher for questions during the lecture. None of my classmates (in China) did so, me neither. Even I had a problem, I would not ask because nobody else did." This inclination of "going with the flow" was also addressed by other participants as an explanation of why they were not used to asking questions. Besides, Nancy and Sharon also emphasized that they were unwilling to "show off" in the classroom. As stated by Nancy: "In China, people seldom asked question publicly in the class. We all have the tendency to go with the flow. Otherwise, people would think you were just showing off purposefully." This also reflected the conformity among Chinese people.

Maintaining the group harmony

Another manifestation of collective culture was that individuals would avoid direct confrontation during interpersonal communication in order to maintain the group harmony. Thus, even the two parties of the conversation were in an equal or close social status, they would still prevent any direct questioning or argument in order not to offend each other. As stated by Nancy: "In China, we try to maintain the harmony within the

group, a balance of the power. We are comfortable with the silent classroom and if someone breaks this harmony, everybody else will feel uncomfortable."

In the classroom, the teacher is the absolute the authority and the students are already located in an inferior position. Thus, for the students, breaking the group harmony by questioning the teacher would be the last thing they would do. Sharon said: "I think the best way is to talk with the teacher (on your question) after class. This would avoid embarrassment. Honestly, back to the teacher years, I was always afraid that someone might ask a tricky question. Of course, every class has some students who like to be in the limelight." Therefore, from the perspectives of these Chinese students and teachers, avoiding questioning in class and maintaining the harmony within classroom was a tacit consensus between each other.

Conformity as a motivation

However, this collectivism or conformity to the group would not always become a hindrance to the willingness and motivation of asking questions, especially when the environment changed. As explained by Mike: "We Chinese students are silent in the class and don't ask question because nobody else does so. But when we come here, there are students from all over the world in the classroom, not only Chinese students. They are passionate to ask question, both American students and international students from other countries…Asking questions is no longer an atypical behavior because everybody does so. You will appear abnormal if you don't do so. For me, I ask more frequently in the class, though I still prefer asking questions after class. Well, of course, it is still kind

of conformity; but I'll say it led to different consequences under different circumstances."

Cindy expressed the similar idea: "When people around you were all asking questions, it would be odd if you weren't. In that case, I was willing to ask questions, too." In other words, once they realized that asking question was the norm of American class, they felt the pressure to do so in order not to be singled out of the group.

Femininity of Chinese culture

According to Hofstede (2001), Chinese culture was also characterized as femininity, which valued the interpersonal relationship and concern for others. The American culture, in contrast, was masculine which valued competitiveness and assertiveness (Hofstede, 2001).

On the surface, the Chinese students' concern for group harmony and avoidance of confrontation could be explained as their emphasis on interpersonal relationship and lack of competitiveness and assertiveness. However, an important index related to the dimension of masculinity vs. femininity is the students' attitudes towards education and academic performance. Compared with the students in feminine cultures, their counterparts in masculine ones took school failure as a more serious incident and tended to respond with more extreme behavior such as committing suicide (Hofstede, 2001). In this point, I can't see much difference between students in China and America, though they were grouped in opposite category in this dimension. In China, the school competition is extremely tense due to the huge student population and limited educational resources. Although Chinese students' silence in classroom might be cited as

an evidence of lacking competitiveness from the American perspectives, they compete with each other every time and all the time.

The concern for others, however, was supported from the interviews. The participants' caution on their questions focused on two concerns: 1) If my question is too simple to be asked? and 2) If my question is valuable to others? For the second point, they hoped their questions would contribute to the class or at least be meaningful to others, too. In addition, they were unwilling to waste the time of other students because of their personal question. Generally, these two concerns were intertwined. For example, Nancy said: "You know, you are not the only student in the classroom. It was just my question, not the others. So I would consider that maybe this was just my problem and maybe it was a simple one that everybody else knew the answer. (If I asked) it would waste others' time."

Mike expressed the similar opinion: "Sometimes I had a problem, but other people might not be interested in it (so I was not going to ask it). If I realized this question was going to have some general meanings and help other students, I would." For Cindy, this concern even outweighed her concern on English expression. She said: "I would not be overcritical on my English expression, as long as I could make my point. My major worry was if my question would contribute to this topic or chapter. The ideal case was you made an excellent point, which would both inspire yourself and benefit others. However, you couldn't always guarantee that your question would be meaningful to others. This was my primary concern on asking question."

This concern for others influenced the participants' attitudes to questions asked by their classmates, too. As discussed above, although they had rather strict criteria on their own questions, they tended to be quite tolerant of others' questions. Indeed, they occasionally addressed these questions as "meaningless" or "stupid" and believed this excessive student participation broke the class organization or quality to some extent; but they also stressed constantly that they recognized the significance of a student's question and that they benefited from questions asked by their classmates.

Long-term orientation

For the fifth dimension, long-term orientation vs. short-term orientation, I didn't find much direct evidence from the interviews to support its effects on the participants' question-asking behavior. Thus, this dimension might not apply in this specific issue. As a matter of fact, Hofstede (2001) didn't provide this dimension's application in education as he did on the other four dimensions.

Differences in educational environment

All five participants were graduate students who had completed their undergraduate study in China. Sharon got both her bachelor's and master's degrees in China before coming to the United States; and Randy obtained a master's degree from another American institution. They agreed that the Chinese educational environment and the teaching and learning styles in China had great influences on their study in the United States. During the interviews, they were asked to compare and contrast the education they received back in China and in America. For the five participants, the most obvious and impressive differences were the loose class environment of the

American university and the open teaching style of the American professors. In addition, they all mentioned the Confucian tradition in China and its effects on Chinese education.

Compared with other Ancient Chinese philosophers and masters, Confucius undoubtedly has the most significant influences on Chinese culture and society, including Chinese education. As stated by Cindy: "Clearly, Confucius' thoughts are influential on Chinese education, though I can't tell specifically what effects he has on our attitudes towards education or our teaching methods. It's just a consensus among the Chinese, even you don't know much about Chinese education." One important characteristic of Confucian-oriented education is respectful learning: the students have to respect their teachers as the authoritative figures and obey their words. This may explain why questioning the teacher in the classroom has never been a tradition or norm in the Chinese classroom.

Meanwhile, the participants also reported the different educational environment and academic culture they observed and experienced in the United States, as noticed above. One of the most noticeable differences was that American students constantly interrupted the lecture, spoke up, and raised questions. As stated by Randy: "They (the American students) say whatever comes to their mind, they discuss on one argument and ask question for the class to discuss. The American professors like that." The teaching methods of the American teachers are also different from those of the Chinese teachers. As reported by Nancy: "I can feel the American teachers care about the course very much and prepare the lecture carefully. They have a different attitude and they care about if you really understand. In China, what the professors cared was to finish their

jobs. Instead, they (the American professors) use all methods to make sure you understand." Sharon, from the perspective as a former teacher, also observed that: "The American teachers use various strategies to organize the teaching materials, design the classroom activities, and evaluate the students' performance."

Mike attributed this difference to the Western educational culture, which tracked back to the Socratic tradition: "The best teacher should motivate and inspire the students to explore the problem by themselves. I remember the Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates ever said that teachers should ask right questions instead of merely telling students the correct answer. I think this is the fundamental difference between Chinese education and American, or the whole Western education." Cindy also said: "In the America, the teachers' role is supplementary; they would not push you or urge you to finish your assignment. You have to do it by yourself and seek help spontaneously. The teacher just gives you a direction and you have to find the problem and search for the solution independently."

These findings coincided with the Confucian-Socratic framework proposed by Tweed and Lehman (2002). Four factors associated with asking questions were identified by the participants: the teacher-student relationship, the roles of teacher, learning strategies, and purpose of learning.

The teacher-student relationship

Confucian-oriented education valued respectful learning and treated the teacher as the authority in the classroom (Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Warden, Chen, & Caskey, 2005). In Chinese schools, the typical teacher-student relationship is hierarchical, which

was confirmed by the participants and discussed from the perspective of power distance. Under such relationships, students have to respect their teacher as authority in classroom as well as out of the school setting. As stated by Cindy: “For example, we have a tradition to respect the teacher, which is grounded in the Confucian culture. We treat the teacher as the authority in the classroom and we are expected to obey their instruction. Our education doesn’t encourage the students to doubt or criticize the teacher. That’s why we don’t have a strong motivation to raise questions in class.” Mike also said: “In China, we honor the teacher’s dignity and absolute authority. (we didn’t ask question because) We have a faith on the teachers as authorities.” For the students, asking question might violate the authority of the teacher and has the potential to break the power balance, or in this case, imbalance between the teacher and students.

Another issue associated with the hierarchical teacher-student relationship was: if the teacher has said something wrong, the consequence would be very serious. As shared by Sharon, who worked as a college teacher for years: “In China, if a teacher answered a question wrong, he or she would be deadly embarrassed and lose the faith of his or her students. Therefore, if a teacher failed to answer a question, he or she would lose students’ respect. And this student’s behavior (asking questions) would also be regarded as disrespectful.” This may also explain why teachers in China lack a strong motivation to encourage students to ask questions. For the teacher, students’ question might also be viewed as a potential threat or challenge to his or her prestigious position in the classroom.

The roles of teacher

Since Chinese teachers hold the ultimate power and highest position in the classroom, it is understandable that Chinese students generally have high expectations of their teachers. In general, Chinese teachers are expected to be fully responsible to the students' learning and control the entire teaching and learning process. As stated by Cindy: "From elementary school to college, the most common form of class is lecture. This is an established convention. We are used to being pushed by the teacher to accomplish the tasks." Nancy also stated that: "We just accepted the fact that teachers should dominate the classroom. This is determined by the conditions of China. Most of the time, it was the teacher who was controlling the class."

Under the Chinese educational system, teacher is traditionally viewed as the most important component. This could be best illustrated by a Chinese saying: *An accomplished disciple owes his accomplishments to his great master*. Or literately, *The best way to learn is to learn from the best*. In Chinese schools, the teacher is supposed to be the omniscient expert in his or her domain. As stated by Sharon: "In China, the teacher would tell you directly what is important and students were comfortable with that, because we assumed that the teachers should know everything in his or her domain."

Therefore, in Chinese school, questions asked by students might be viewed by the teacher as an implication of his or her poor teaching ability. This could be illustrated by Nancy's statement: "…if you paid enough attention to the lecture, you wouldn't have any to ask." The underlying assumption here is: all you have to know has already been

included in the lecture. If you still have a question, that would simply be your problem but not be your teacher's fault. She added: "We Chinese students are not used to learning with critical thinking because we believe whatever the teacher says is correct and beneficial…Compared with the American teachers, Chinese teachers don't encourage the students to ask questions. Instead, they just tell you what is important."

Regarding classroom teaching, the participants generally preferred direct and clear instruction in the form of lecture, as we have noticed. It was pointed out earlier that the participants appreciated the American professors' friendliness and open-mindedness to student questions and challenges. However, from the eyes of the participants, the active student participation also led to disarrangement of the class, which suggested the teacher's failure to manage the classroom. Nancy expressed her discontent in a restrained tone: "I only thought they didn't pay attention; but there weren't so many questions anyway, so it wouldn't be much disruption." Sharon's comments, however, were more direct: "…I think there should be a leading line through a course. I feel some courses are disarranged and loose, without the inherent organization. For example, a professor assigned some reading materials before the class meeting. However, the class discussion turned out to have nothing to do with the reading assignment: it was all about a question asked by a student."

To the participants, the open teaching, which was intended to encourage student participation in the class, lacked a detailed plan and inherent coherence and structure. Their expectation that the teacher as an expert, focusing on knowledge delivery, was not met.

Learning strategies

The students' learning strategies and classroom behavior were directly influenced by their previous educational experiences. For the Chinese students, the primary learning methods were listening to the lecture, taking notes, and reviewing after class (Barker, 1990; Huang, 2005, 2009; Valiente, 2008). This was supported by the participants' comments. For example, as stated by Nancy: "I prefer to listen to the lecture…and seldom ask questions voluntarily. It is just my learning habit. I think I can learn more from listening to the lecture and reviewing by myself." Mike also reported that it is hard to change his accustomed learning method: "I am still using the learning skills I used in China: listening to the lecture, taking notes, reviewing after class. Although the American professors encouraged us to ask question or discuss with them, it was hard to change your established styles overnight."

Sharon remarked: "I think this (not ask questions) is related to the educational tradition of China. For example, in the old-style private schools, the major learning method was memorizing. Students were not encouraged to ask questions and had little opportunity to interact with the teacher. The American professor would assign some reading before the class, Chinese students would read the paper, but not in a critical way. Because unconsciously we believed whatever the teacher gave us was valuable." In other words, Chinese students would not ask questions until they fully mastered the learning material.

Another characteristic of Confucian-oriented learning was emphasizing the effortful learning and hard work (Li, 2002; Tweed & Lehman, 2002). The student's

personal effort is highly valued in Chinese school and is believed to be an essential criterion of a good student. As explained by Randy: “In Chinese education, learning is more about understanding by yourself, rather than asking questions.” Here, he stressed “by yourself”. Thus, when they had a problem, they would rather spend more time working on it individually than raising the question immediately in the class. Nancy said: “In my opinion, the most important is thinking. You have to pay much attention on what the professor says in the class. Then you have to review after class, because you have to take time to fully understand the learning material. For me, I think listening to the lecture and thinking are the most important.” Mike also said: “When I had a problem, I would first try to solve by myself. If I failed after several attempts, I would ask the professor for help.” Sharon explained that she preferred to solve problems by herself because “It made me think. During this process, I would have more reading and might revise the current question to a better one. I believed I learned more from it.”

Obviously, influenced by their previous educational experiences, the participants typically believed the reflective thinking and personal effort after class benefited them more than asking question in the class. Sharon made this point clearly: “I like this way (solving problem independently after class) because it gives me time to consider if it makes sense or if I should ask a better one. Of course I ask some questions in class, but basically those are the ones I’ve been thinking for a long time or the ones I always want to ask. I feel the Americans’ (questions) are loose and I don’t think they seriously think about their questions. They just keep asking.” That’s why despite they agreed that the questions asked by their classmates inspired their thinking, they still kept silent in the

classroom. For the participants, it was hard to change their accustomed learning strategies, though they appreciated the merit of asking questions.

The purpose of learning

Confucian-oriented education focused on the comprehension and acquisition of essential knowledge as the purpose of education (Tweed & Lehman, 2002; Wang & Farmer, 2008). For these Chinese students, academic development was the primary goal that motivated them to pursue a higher degree in the United States. They also had their own standards for a good class and expectations of what they were going to achieve. Apparently, asking questions was not among these expectations. For example, Nancy said: "In my opinion, asking question is not the goal. You have to understand." Sharon also stated that she learned little from the questions and comments of her classmates. For these participants, they more cared about what they actually learned from the course regardless of how many questions they asked. This was consistent with their evaluation of the effectiveness of their professors, who should make them feel they achieved something, instead of merely encouraging student participation.

In Ancient China, students learned in order to take the imperial examination and become administrative officials (Tweed & Lehman, 2002). For people at that time, passing the imperial examination was practically the only way an individual could move from lower social status to the prominent class. In order to pass the exam, students have to study the works of the great masters and the interpretation by contemporary authoritative scholars. This evolved into the examination orientation of modern China's education (Cheng & Qi, 2006). As stated by Mike, "In Chinese education, it is the

teachers who hold the standard answers, or evaluating criteria. So we have to accept the teachers' interpretation in order to performance well on the homework and test." Randy also recalled that: "The education we received was spoon-fed, or 'stuffing the duck'. You are not allowed to ask questions and have to confine to the only correct answer." Nancy explained: "This is determined by the conditions of China…The system of examination forced the teachers to implement in the class with little emphasis on if the students understood or not. They wouldn't explain how the conclusion was reached. Instead, they just presented the gist you need to know in the test."

Under the examination-driven educational system, it would be the unavoidable consequence that acquisition and memorization of knowledge, rather than critical thinking or questioning, became the focus of the teaching and learning. As a result, the student participation in terms of asking question and two-way teacher-student communication in the classroom were regarded as trivial or a waste of time.

Summary

In sum, this chapter illustrated the findings with respect to the participants' experiences and feelings about asking questions in the American graduate level classes. Three themes emerged during the data analysis, which were English deficiency, differences in cultural backgrounds, and different educational environment between China and America. The English deficiency was reported as a major challenge that discouraged the participants from raising questions in the classroom. They were extremely concerned about awkward expression and tended to think over their questions several times before speaking out. This delayed response due to language process and

translation usually cost their opportunity to ask question in class. Besides, when they realized that they were disadvantaged in language ability, they naturally tended to talk less to avoid displaying disadvantages.

In addition to the language problem, the participants were hesitant to ask question or cast doubt on their teachers due to their belief that the teacher is superior in the classroom. They were committed to the Chinese traditional belief that the student should respect the teacher and not interrupt the teacher for question in the middle of the lecture. Regarding classroom teaching, they preferred organized lecture over the student-centered form characterized by extensive student participation. This was rooted in their belief that teachers should be fully in charge of the classroom teaching and learning as the secure source of knowledge and information. They were also unlikely to break the group harmony by confronting the teacher in public as a result of the collective culture of China. Moreover, one of their typical concerns about asking question was if their question would also be the interest or concern of the other students. This "concern for others" indicated the femininity character of Chinese culture.

For the participants, asking questions was obviously not among their preferred learning ways, although they appreciated the contribution of their classmates' questions and comments in the class. They also agreed that the questions asked by others often enriched their thinking. This indicated that the participants typically paid more attention on independent thinking instead of raising questions lightly during the class. For them, the primary learning strategies were to listen to the lecture attentively and review the learning materials after class; and the goal of learning was to understand the learning

material by their consistent effort. Therefore, when they had a problem, they preferred to first solve it by themselves before seeking help from the professor. This was consistent with the emphasis of effort learning in Confucian-oriented education. This also matched their expectations on the roles of effective teachers who should deliver well-organized lectures as the authoritative expert in their fields of study. The participants expressed their discomfort to some extent when the lecture was disturbed by the constant student questions. Besides, the examination-orientation education of China also developed the pragmatic orientation of Chinese teachers and students who focused on the acquisition of knowledge while ignoring the teacher-student interaction in terms of asking and answering questions. However, it should be noticed that although their habits on asking questions didn't change a lot in America, the easy and relaxing atmosphere of the American classrooms made the participants more willing to ask questions voluntarily and participate in the class activities.

In the next chapter, the research findings would be discussed in a synthesizing way around the shared concerns among the participants that influenced their question-asking behavior.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The study results revealed the participants' attitudes and feelings about asking questions in classroom during their graduate study in an American university. In last chapter, results from data analysis were summarized and presented under the three themes emerged during the data analysis: English deficiency, national cultural differences, and differences of the educational environment and academic culture between China and America. As I stated earlier, the Chinese students' reluctance to ask questions in class was a very complex phenomenon and called for investigation from various perspectives. Although the three identified themes provided insights into interpreting the participants' question-asking behavior, any single theory alone cannot explain this complex phenomenon. For example, the language problem was identified as a major barrier that hindered the participants to ask questions in the classroom. However, the underlying forces that shaped the participants' concern about their English skills needed to be investigated with respect to the cultural and educational issues that were not directly related to the linguistic problem.

From the interviews, the reasons the participants gave for their reluctance to ask questions did include shyness, English deficiency, and unfamiliarity with the learning material, but they all focused on the cultural beliefs and learning habits that were

grounded in their previous life and educational experiences. For the participants, the change in ideologies must be achieved before behavioral change could ever happen. Therefore, in the rest of this chapter, the research findings would be discussed around the three concerns shared by the participants in relation to asking question: student's respect of the teacher, the value of question, and English ability. In addition, the Chinese concepts of thinking and speaking were discussed as the major conceptual foundation of the participants' perceptions of the significance of thinking and the value of speaking. Finally, the classroom environment, with respect to the behaviors of professor and other students, was also discussed as the primary external contextual factor that influenced the participants' motivation and opportunity to ask question.

Student's respect of the teacher

In Chinese schools, the student's respect of teacher resulted from both the large power distance in Chinese culture and respectful learning valued by Confucian-oriented education. During the interviews, all the participants noticed the stratified order within Chinese society reflected as the inferior's respect and obedience to the superior. Similarly, they also accepted the unbalanced power distribution between teacher and students in the classroom, as students have to follow their teacher's instruction unconditionally. In their previous educational experiences, the participants were accustomed to perceiving their teacher as a respectable, authoritative, and, sometimes, authoritarian image in the classroom. Thus, questioning the teacher is a violation of both the obedience to the superior and the respect rule of Chinese education. Respecting the

teacher, in this sense, is not only a rule of classroom, but also an agreement acknowledged by the Chinese people culturally.

This established respect to teacher also influenced the Chinese students' learning strategies and classroom behavior. As reported by the participants, in Chinese school, the typical behavior of a student in the classroom was to listen to the lecture attentively and take notes quietly. Students were not allowed to talk with each other or ask question voluntarily, unless they were asked to by the teacher. Specifically, the participants' respect of the teacher had influenced their question-asking behavior and feelings about asking questions in three ways.

Student's fear to their teacher

First of all, this respect of the teacher generated the participants' fear of the teacher: they reported that they were afraid of talking to the teacher as a result of the unequal and formal teacher-student relationship. As explained by Nancy: "In China, the teacher was always serious and strict. You felt ill at ease when you talked to the teacher." Mike also made the similar comments: "The teacher-student position was distant and unequal…You felt pressured when you talked to the teacher. It was just like the glass ceiling, you had to experience it in person in order to perceive that." Randy explained the inherent link between the respect to teacher and the authority of teacher: "Our Chinese culture and Chinese education stressed the dignity and authority of the teacher. The former is a perquisite of the latter because you have to first respect you teacher, then you will accept his or her authority and follow the instruction."

One direct consequence of this fear was that Chinese students would avoid communicating with the teacher to the greatest extent. That's why Chinese students were reluctant to voluntarily ask question in the classroom. On the contrary, they observed that in America, teacher and students were more intimate and equal in status. For example, the American professors didn't mind to be addressed by their first names and the American students talked frequently and even made jokes during the lecture. Unlike their "rigid" and "serious" Chinese counterparts, the American professors encouraged students to raise question and challenge their ideas and didn't regard such behavior as impolite or disrespectful. The difference in status between American teacher and students was almost invisible and each party seemed satisfied with this equal position. Mike said that he could clearly feel the different communicative way between teacher and student in the United States: "Each party is in an equal position. We interact frequently and I don't feel constrained when I talked to my professors." When the participants felt relaxed to talk with the teacher, it would also be less difficult for them to ask questions spontaneously.

Interrupting the lecture is disrespectful

The second concern related to student respect was that it was regarded as inappropriate for students to interrupt the professor for questions in the middle of the class. As stated by Randy: "In China, you can't just stop the professor in the middle of the class. However, here (in America) it is common for students to stop the professor and ask questions directly." This didn't mean that Chinese students couldn't ask questions at all. Due to the huge class size and consideration for discipline, Chinese students were

encouraged to ask questions after class in order to maintain the organization of the lecture and show the respect to the teacher. This may explain why the participants still preferred to seek help from the professor after class when they came to the United States.

In Chinese schools, the students' quietness in the class as a sign of respect also became an established rule and consensus between both teacher and student. For these participants who were non-native English speakers and international students in a host country, this preference not only indicated their uncertainty on their academic performance and English ability, but also reflected their belief of disciplined students.

One-way lecturing in Chinese classroom

Third, the tradition of respect to teacher also led to the authoritative one-directional communication style in Chinese classrooms: students were expected to listen to the lecture and were not encouraged to interact with the teacher. As we have noticed, the Chinese students were accustomed to receiving the lecture under a secure situation. This certainty was assured by first, the clear lecture organization and direct instruction; and second, the authoritative image of teacher as the credible source of knowledge. Under this one-directional teaching pattern, the students' academic performance became a directive indication of the teacher's competence. Thus, if a student asked a question on what he or she didn't understand, not only would the individual be embarrassed, also the teacher might be offended because it suggested some problems with the teacher's teaching skills.

In addition, the Confucian-oriented learning emphasized the acquisition of essential knowledge and passing the examination as the ultimate goal of learning. Thus, the teacher was respected due in great to his or her status as the transmitter of knowledge and the authoritative interpreter of the textbooks. As a result, direct lecturing became the most effective and important teaching strategy for practical learning needs. Even today, examination is still the most important instrument to select candidates for schools and other organizations and the practice of "teaching for exam" still prevails in modern China' s education. Therefore, the Chinese teachers were highly respected by their students, as they are the authoritative expert of learning materials and credible source of correct answers that the students would need in the exam. Similarly, the students simply felt that they didn't have the qualification to question the correctness of their teacher.

This respect to teacher was, unfortunately, distorted by the examination-oriented educational system of China. Since elementary school, Chinese students were required to behave properly in the classroom and listen to the lecture quietly in order to acquire knowledge necessary for the tests and exams. For Chinese teachers, their ultimate role was to cover as much information as possible in order to cope with the high demands of standard examination. This "stuffing the duck" teaching style forced the students to accept the standard answers unconditionally taught by the teachers with little space for personal opinion or interpretation. The emergent needs for high scores shaped Chinese students' pragmatic thinking styles and learning strategies: you don't have to ask any question, just remember what the teacher said. When they came to the United States,

although they felt a need to change, it was hard for them to embrace American styles and abandon their established ones immediately.

Value of question

Another major concern among the participants was the value of their questions. Their first focus was whether their questions were good enough to be asked. As a result, they were trying desperately to ask excellent questions and avoid any simple or stupid one. The second concern was that they didn't know if their questions would also be helpful to others. They typically felt it was not appropriate to waste the valuable class time on a question that was only related to their own interests. However, the participants admitted that high-quality questions were rare, and their concerns were not always shared by others. Therefore, most of the time, they simply chose to withhold their questions until the end of the class.

The inherent quality of question

Asking high quality question only

In Chinese education, asking questions was never central to the teaching and learning process. On the contrary, for the students, asking questions might reveal their poor understanding on the learning material "because we believe the wise usually don't ask," explained by Randy. The participants all learned this lesson from their previous educational experiences that if their question was too simple, they would be derided by their classmates and teacher. That's why they had very high standards for their own questions, as we noticed in last chapter. Although they didn't ask many questions in China, they were fully aware of the fact that their questions reflected their academic

achievement and performance in the classroom. This was supported by Cortazzi and Jin's (1996) finding that Chinese students had very different concepts of asking questions than did the Western learners: the Chinese valued the thoughtful questions, which based on reflective thinking, and aimed to receive confirmation and other positive feedback from the professor. Thus, when they asked a question, they typically hoped that their question would be of good quality and would contribute to the class discussion.

When asking questions became an indication of one's academic performance, the students would vie with one another to ask the better question. For example, Nancy said: "Some people were just used to asking questions in the classroom. This might be their learning habits or related to their personality. But in my opinion, they just wanted to display their ability. " Sharon also said when she was a teacher, she felt those active students in her classroom were searching for the limelight to display their talent. In this sense, we may say that for these Chinese students, asking questions was not the problem; rather, it was asking a high quality question.

Asking question as a member of Chinese people

In addition, as international students, asking good questions had more serious and important meaning to the participants. In the collective Chinese society, the individual-group relationship is close and any individual is closely tied to social groups such as family, school, and working unit. The relationship between an individual and his or her group is so close that his or her self-identity usually merges with the group's identity. As noticed in the interview, the participants frequently used the phrases as "we Chinese" "our styles" to refer their personal experiences or feelings. In many cases, the

participants unconsciously regarded themselves as a representative of the collective Chinese people, especially when they were in a foreign country. As a result, the embarrassment due to low level question would not only matter to the individual, but the whole Chinese group, at least in their eyes. This was also confirmed by previous findings that in Confucius-heritage societies, the academic success was regarded as a source of pride and failure would be a shame for not only the individual, but the whole group (Salili, 1996; Watkins & Biggs, 2001).

That's why the participants were so sensitive about the quality of their questions: they didn't want the Chinese student group (as represented by themselves) to be looked down by other students and the professors because of their stupid questions. For example, Cindy explained that since she knew she was inferior in the English ability to her classmates, she had to demonstrate her insights on the learning content by raising high quality critical questions. For these Chinese students who were strongly connected to the collective group value, even the pure academic behavior, such as asking questions, was given significant meanings.

Don't ask personal question as a virtue

In addition to the concern about the quality of question, the participants were reluctant to ask questions because they were not sure if their problem had the universal meanings to other students in the classroom. When the participants were about to ask a question, they were not only considering their own interests, but the interests of the whole class. Influenced by the collective Chinese culture, they expected their questions would be also appreciated or at least acknowledged by the other members of the group.

Besides, they typically worried that their frequent question-asking behavior might interfere with class teaching and the learning of other students. This tendency to consider their personal needs in relation to the interests of others also reflected the feminine character of Chinese culture. By their standards, asking too many personal questions that were only related to their own interests might be viewed by others as a violation of group values and inconsideration for others.

The second concern related to the "others" among the participants was the worry about wasting class time. For Chinese students, they believed that the class time would be best used by leaving it completely to the teacher for knowledge delivery and instruction. Questions and discussion, however, could be left outside the class. In China, the class organization is strict and the expected amount of information is large, too. For the teachers, it is their responsibility and primary purpose to convey as much knowledge as more possible within the limited class time. All the five participants mentioned that the value of time was constantly emphasized by their teachers in their previous educational experiences. This could be best illustrated by Randy's words: "In high school, my head teacher always told us: 'When you are chit-chatting in class, you are disturbing the order of the class and you are wasting the time of the whole class. You talked for one minute and you wasted everybody one minute, which was 60 minutes.'" Mike also said: "Sometimes when I asked a question that had been taking the professor several minutes to explain, some classmates might mutter to suggest you were wasting the class time. In that case, the professor might stop and ask me to go to his office after class."

This consideration for others was viewed as a high virtue in Chinese culture. Therefore, when the participants thought their questions were irrelevant to others or might take too much class time, they would choose to save them after class or wait for future opportunity.

The value of other's question

The participants' concern for the value of the questions not only influenced their own question-asking behavior in the American university, but also their attitudes towards questions asked by their classmates. By their standards, many of these questions were unnecessary at most and could be withheld until the class was over. For example, Sharon said: "I am taking a statistics course this semester. I have never taken any course in statistics before. So, it is fair to say that this course is challenging to me; not mention I have to learn it in English. The difficulty is double-faceted. But sometimes the American students just asked many extremely simple questions. I cannot help wondering: how come you don't understand that? I mean, even I could understand it. It's just like one plus one equals two. Chinese students would never ask that question." Nancy also said: "It seemed to me that some American students usually raised questions immediately without further thinking. They were not afraid of asking simple questions. Well, I mean, you should ask when you don't understand. But some of the questions were so simple that you would find answer no further than the textbook."

The participants' attitudes towards questions asked by their classmates, especially those simple ones, were consistent with their belief about the value of questions, as well as the concern on the class time. As indicated above, they thought that

many of these questions were only related to their personal interests, or had little to do with the class. These questions, not only interrupted the classroom order, but wasted the valuable class time that could have been devoted to knowledge delivery and explanation.

In sum, the participants' concern about the quality of question focused on the "self" and "others". On the "self" level, they concerned the inherent quality and value of their question and wanted to ask a question that could both demonstrate their academic competency and contribute to the class learning. Meanwhile, the concern for "self" was also intertwined with the concern for "others": they hoped their questions would be helpful to other students in the classroom and they would withhold the question once they realized it was less in value, or felt that their question-asking behavior might interfere with the learning of other students.

English ability

When the participants came up with a question with which they were satisfied, the story was not over yet: as non-native English speakers, they still had to consider if they could ask the question clearly and accurately in spoken English. In many cases, they were not sure whether it would be appropriate to raise a question and whether their question was good enough; and in the case they were, they often found difficulty finding the accurate English expression to deliver their thoughts. By the time they finally found the satisfying expression and translation, it was usually too late to raise the question because the focus of the lecture had already changed.

During the interviews, the participants talked a lot about their English deficiency and the associated difficulties of organizing questions and translating them quickly.

Compared with the native English speakers, the participants needed more time to modify their words in order to ask the question accurately. This mediation process, however, usually cost them the opportunity to speak up in the class. Mike depicted a typical scenario in his class: the professor finished explaining one point and asked: "Any questions?" He or she would wait for five seconds and said: "No? Okay, let's move on." He found that five-second was not enough for him to come up with a question in English.

The participants' concern about their English problem also involved the presence of their classmates, both the local American students and international students from other countries. Both Cindy and Sharon found that international students from Middle East and South America were generally better in oral English than Chinese students. However, for the participants, the largest pressure was still from the sharp contrast to the American students in terms of English ability. As explained by Cindy: "When you were taking class with the Americans, the discrepancy in English ability was clear and it kept reminding me that my language ability was lower than theirs. The performance of others would also remind you that you are inferior in language."

For the participants, they knew the English was their disadvantage, so they simply avoided speaking up voluntarily in the class in order to prevent revealing their shortcoming. In this sense, keeping silence in the classroom could also be viewed as a strategy the Chinese students used to avoid embarrassment due to English deficiency. Though English deficiency was the direct reason, this strong concern also revealed their fear of the negative consequence associated with awkward expression, which was a

manifestation of uncertainty avoidance. Sharon made this point clearly: “My questions are part of my academic performance. I know people may evaluate my performance through my question, though I will not judge them. ” In other words, similar to their concern about the quality of their question, they hope their English expression would leave the professor and classmates with a positive impression.

Although the English problem individually accounted for a great deal of the participants’ reluctance to ask questions, it was usually the first one to be solved. After all, compared with the cultural influences and the established learning styles that accumulated during their previous experiences, the English ability is easier to change and improve within a short period. For example, Nancy told me at the end of the interview that she didn’t think language was a major challenge to her because: “It was easy to improve your English. It might take you one month or two to adjust, but it would be solved anyway. I don’t think they (the incoming Chinese students) have to worry about it.” Randy also said: “…but I think English is not the most important, the key is your question. Surely the English was a problem at first, it still is now; but only a minor one. In a word, unless you didn’t pay attention or didn’t think, otherwise, there must be some questions.”

Thus, when we analyzed the effects of English ability on Chinese international students’ reluctance to ask question in classroom, we’d better view it beyond mere linguistic competency. As we may find later, the participants typically had a reasonable recognition of their English competency and set realistic expectations on their English expressions. Their concern on the English expression, therefore, ultimately reflected

their caution to speak, which was rooted in the Chinese traditional concepts of speaking and thinking. That's why they would avoid speaking up lightly in public until making a sophisticated mediation on both their thoughts and expressions. This would be the focus of next section.

Thinking and Speaking

The importance of thinking was a concurrent theme mentioned by all five participants during the interviews. When asked why they were relatively silent in the classroom, they explained that they were listening to the lecture attentively and thinking about the learning material. When we were discussing their caution about asking questions, they explained that they needed more time to think about the value of the question, the clear expression, as well as the appropriate English translation. When they were explaining why they preferred to first work on the problem individually before seeking help from the professor, they again stated that this independent thinking process enabled them to learn more.

On the contrary, Western educators valued the merit of student speaking and viewed it as an indication of students' active thinking and effective learning. Therefore, it was natural for them to jump to the conclusion that these silent Chinese students were "passive learners". The concepts of thinking and speaking need to be examined under the context of Chinese culture and education.

The merit of silence

Although educators in Western cultures usually interpret the absence of speech as a lack of communication (Zembylas & Michaelides, 2004), Chinese people are

comfortable with silence and silence is usually perceived as virtual and beneficial for deeper thinking (Kim, 2002). For the Chinese, being silence is not only an effective way to avoid the potential embarrassment and open conflict, but also a demonstration of individual's virtue to not waste others' time on less important questions (Valiente, 2008). For students, it is also a sign of considerateness because asking too many personal questions may interfere with the learning of other students (Li, 2009). Relating the Western educators' negative suggestion that Chinese students' silence was passiveness and lack of motivation, we may ask: Can we simply discard these students' learning preference of independent quiet thinking and systematic knowledge acquisition without extensive oral communication as passive or low efficient?

Thinking without speaking

For the Chinese students, the major sign of effective learning and academic achievement was the mastery of essential knowledge, which was valued by Confucian-oriented education. Accordingly, the most important learning strategies were listening to the lecture attentively and reviewing the notes after the class. In Chinese education, one has to make self-improvement through reflective thinking and constant effort. This belief was in concord with the finding of Jin and Cortazzi (2006) that reflective thinking and students' own effort was of central significance to the Confucius heritage of learning. Kim's (2002) study indicated that the assumption of speaking as a good sign of deep thinking might not apply for the students who were educated under the opposite assumption. For Chinese students, speaking and thinking were not necessarily interrelated with each other.

Similarly, one also has no need to demonstrate his or her attention or engagement by asking question as the Western educators expect. Other researchers also found that Chinese students were silent verbally but active mentally, which was an illustration of respect and knowledge in Confucian-oriented education (Gudykunst, 2004; Hu, 2002; Valiente, 2008). This was supported by the participants' comments that they have been listening to the lecture attentively and thinking about the questions asked by their classmates actively; despite the fact that they didn't speak up a lot. Besides, they also found it beneficial to listen to his classmates' questions. Mike said: "Occasionally I was not sure how to ask a question. At that time, if another student asked a similar one, I would also benefit from it. Besides, one's perspective on an issue is often established. Thus, others' comments and questions could inspire you to think from diverse perspectives." For the participants, they have been actively thinking all the time during the lecture, though they didn't ask as many questions as the American students did.

Moreover, the participants also mentioned that they didn't want to be viewed as the person who was eager to show off or boast of his or her achievement in front of others. For example, Nancy clearly stated that: "I am not such people who are willing to show off in public." Randy also emphasized that: "(although I asked fairly more questions in the classroom) I was definitely not showing off in the class. Because I didn't ask those questions that deliberately displayed my knowledge or boasted myself." Instead of showcasing one's achievement or advantage, individuals should downplay their achievement in order to make continuous progress. For Chinese teachers, one of their responsibilities was to restrain their students' desire to show off in public and

encourage them to self-reflect on their deficiency and weakness. Therefore, it was understandable why asking question was never valued or encouraged by Chinese educators.

Thinking, then speaking

According to the Confucian-oriented learning, it is undesirable for a student to question before achieving comprehensive understanding. While their American counterparts prefer to verbalize their thoughts and ask questions in classroom, the Chinese students are likely to solve their problem in an inner-reflective manner. As we have found earlier, the participants reported that they would not ask a question immediately in the class because they wanted to first spend time thinking about this question individually. Randy said: "I would first think about the question. If I still didn't understand after two or three minutes, I might ask then; otherwise, I would not or discuss with the professor after class." Sharon also said in most cases, those questions she asked in the classroom were the ones she had been thinking for a long time or the ones she found in other courses. She explained: "The questions you found in the class were usually frivolous and loose. Personally, I would like to reflect my questions after class and reorganize and refine these questions. Therefore, next time, when I had a chance, I could ask from a better perspective."

In addition, after a period of mediation, they could usually achieve a deeper understanding of the issue and come up with a better question. Randy said: "Sometimes I found a problem in the class, but before I could ask it, someone else did so. In that case, I would listen to his or her description and the professors' interpretation. I also gained

something. Besides, if I could point out another valuable point based on the professor's answer, I would also speak it up." This indicated that, unlike what some Western educators assumed, Chinese students were participating actively in the classroom, though they didn't ask a lot of questions, as the Western teachers have expected. From the perspectives of these participants, this process of thinking and synthesizing was of much more value to their learning, compared with asking questions immediately in the class.

In this sense, the Chinese students are not more passive than the American students: they are both paying attention to the lecture and thinking actively. The only difference is that these Chinese students don't demonstrate their activeness in The American way. As explained by Randy: "In China, not asking questions doesn't mean that you don't understand; because we believe the wise usually don't ask. However, in America, if you don't have a question, you might have not paid attention." This may explain why Chinese students were constantly misunderstood by Western educators as passive learners because of their silence and reluctance to ask questions.

Classroom environment

As we have noticed, the participants stated that their question-asking behavior was significantly influenced by the classroom environment, notably the physical class organization and the atmosphere created by the teacher and other students. They all reported that they were participating in the classroom activities more frequently and asking more questions in the American classroom when they perceived the different classroom environment in the United States.

The motivating effect of American professors

The first factor that influenced the participants' motivation to ask questions was the American teacher's classroom behavior, including his or her teaching style and personal charisma. For the participants, the equal position between teacher and student in the American classroom was immediately perceptible. This to some extent changed the participants' established cognition on the image of teacher developed in China. Randy noticed: "In the classroom, the professors are not in a prominent position; instead, they give the stage to the students. They let the students to participate in the learning activities and even guide the learning procedures. The students will discuss, ask questions, and argue with one another." This short distance between teacher and students enabled the participants to communicate with the professor more freely.

The participants also noticed that the American professors taught in a very different way from that of their previous teachers in China. For example, Cindy said: "The American professors encourage the students to ask questions. They don't have to say it explicitly, because the open classroom atmosphere allows everybody to ask question at any time. Even they don't say, students constantly ask questions. They think it is normal and welcome the questions from students." Under such easy atmosphere, asking question also became less stressful for these participants.

Other participants reported that their general feeling was that the American professors had greater passion for the courses they taught and were energetic in the classroom, which kept the classroom in a lively atmosphere. Nancy said that she could sense that some of her professors designed the instruction carefully and showed great

passion about their teaching subjects. As a result, she also responded with more enthusiasm and participation. Mike also said that some of his American professors had strong charisma, which had positive on his question-asking behavior: “Basically, the teaching methods of Chinese teachers and American teachers are similar, at least in my department. However, the American professors generally are very passionate, they are interested in the teaching material, and they are enthusiastic. Their enthusiasm would, in turn, encourage the students. As a result, the frequency of student question and classroom participation was increased significantly.” He felt that this was the fundamental reason for the different classroom atmosphere in China and America.

The positive influences of diverse classroom

The second issue that was related to the classroom environment was the other students in the classroom. It was found that when there were more international students in the class, the participants were more willing to speak up. As explained by Sharon: “Besides, I would be more active when more international students were present. Because we were all international students and we were non-native English speakers. I felt that our language competency was about the same and some attitudes towards the American culture were similar, too. So I would ask more questions. When there were a lot of American students, I just didn’t feel like speaking.”

Cindy depicted two types of situations: “It depended on different classes. If the Americans and international students were half and half, then the American students would be more active and most international students would be silent. If international students were in the majority with only one American student or two, then everybody

would be participative. In the former situation, the American students were taking most of the time and I wouldn't help speaking less; but in the latter situation, I felt that we were similar because we were all international students. The atmosphere was different." She further explained: "Despite we were from different countries, we didn't have much difference in language ability, though someone's English was better than you. We were all foreigners, (we were all) international students. In that case, I would be more comfortable to interrupt the teacher for questions."

For the participants, the presence of more international students actually provided them a relatively secure environment to speak. Apparently, compared with the American students, international students were under a disadvantage in both language ability and familiarity with the learning material. Thus, they were more vulnerable to be embarrassed by awkward expression or ignorance of the study content. Although these international students were diverse in their cultural backgrounds and educational experiences, they shared the similar (adverse) conditions as foreigners and non-native English speakers. These similar unfavorable conditions made the Chinese students feel greater empathy with the fellow international students than the American classmates. Besides, under this atmosphere, their problems in language and culture were unlikely to become a negative focus. This to some extent relieved the Chinese students' worry about uncertain circumstance. That's why the participants were more comfortable to ask questions in a classroom consisting predominantly of international students.

Chinese students were silenced by American professor and classmates

As we have noticed when discussing the influences of the language problem, the participants were reluctant to speak in class in order to prevent the direct contrast to the American students who were superior in English ability. Once they realized that they were in a disadvantaged position in language ability, they were usually less motivated to ask questions.

In addition, Cindy noticed that the American students tended to dominate the "power of speaking," even considering the gap in English ability. Sharon said that when there were many American students in class, she simply felt it unnecessary to speak up because "they talked a lot anyway." Randy also found this phenomenon in his classes and he explained: "This might be due to the Americans' stereotype that Chinese students or international students were inherently silent in the classroom. You know, since there was always someone speaking in the class, the professor could hardly paid attention to the Chinese students. Or they simply thought you were just unwilling to speak, so they didn't feel like forcing you."

From the perspectives of the American students and professors, they felt that they should not force the Chinese students to speak because they assumed the Chinese students were passive learners and hesitant to ask questions. However, for the participants, the external expectation or pressure from the professor or classmates could be important source of motivation to ask questions. Randy explained: "Some people might be more active if they were pushed (by others). Probably they were just waiting for this chance, this external power to push them forward." Liu (2002) also noticed that

American professors sometimes out of kindness didn't ask Chinese students to speak up in order not to make them feel uncomfortable. In other words, the Chinese students kept silent in classroom because sometimes they were silenced by the American peers and professors.

The influence of class size

A final issue associated with the classroom environment mentioned by the participants was the class size. In China, the typical class size in the participants' past educational experiences ranged from forty to sixty in primary and secondary school. In college, the class size varied according to the type of class. For mandatory courses the number was 100-200 and for core courses the number was around forty. The classical lecture form of class left little chance for the students to interact with the teacher or ask questions. In addition, the huge class size also enabled the students to hide themselves in the crowd from the direct communication with the teacher.

The participants reported that the relative small class size in America made them more comfortable to raise question. For example, Cindy said: "I would ask more questions when I felt comfortable, for example when there were more international students, or there were fewer students in the class." Sharon had the same feeling: "My frequency of asking question related to the class size, for example, I once took a class with only seven classmates. I was relaxed at that course and more participative consequently. " This small class size, again, created a relatively secure and relaxing classroom environment for the participants to speak up and ask question.

Above all, the equal and close teacher-student relationship in the classroom enabled the participants to express their ideas and ask questions with less restriction. Besides, the open, relaxing atmosphere of the American classroom promoted their willingness to raise questions. It was revealed that the participants' motivation and opportunity to ask question were also influenced by the demographic composition and class size of the course. When the class size was small with international students as the majority, the participants were more likely to ask question spontaneously. Otherwise, they might participate and speak less. However, it should be noticed that the diverse student population generally changed the participants' habits of asking questions and increased their motivation to ask questions, as we discovered in last chapter. When the students around them were actively involved with discussing and asking question, the participants also felt the strong need to join them both from their inner desire and external pressure.

Summary

In this chapter, the study findings were discussed around the three concerns shared by the five participants. The participants' concern about asking questions focused on the Chinese belief of respect to teacher, the value of their question, and their English ability.

The teacher-student relationship in the American classroom was usually the first difference perceived by the participants. In Chinese schools, the hierarchical and formal teacher-student relationship kept the teachers in a large distance from the students. As a result, in Chinese classrooms, a student's silence was usually viewed as a sign of respect

for their teacher. In their previous educational experiences, students rarely talked to the teachers, nor asked questions spontaneously. Besides, the teacher's authoritative status was acknowledged by the students as a credible source of information and transmitter of knowledge. In the classroom, Chinese students were not used to questioning their teachers or challenging their ideas. If they had to point out their teacher's fault or express conflicting opinions, they would usually choose to do so in a private and indirect manner after class in order to avoid the public confrontation. Under the examination-driven educational system of China, in order to attain high scores in the standard exams, both teachers and students focused on transmitting and memorizing essential knowledge whereas asking question was seldom among their concerns. In the American classroom, however, the participants observed the professors were constantly interrupted during the lecture by students' question. The professor was willing to discuss the questions with the students, even sometimes they had to admit that they didn't know the answer.

The second concern among the participants was the quality of their question. This concern came from both their uncertainty on the inherent value of their question and their worry about the responses of other students. For the participants, once they recognized the value and importance of asking questions in the American classroom, they typically viewed the chance to ask question as an opportunity to indicate their academic competence. This was consistent with Chinese belief that one had to ask questions on what he or she has understood. Therefore, when they were going to ask a question, they tried desperately to ask a good one. They spent a lot of time mediating the value of the question and considering the accurate expression. This mediation process,

however, usually cost their chance to place the question timely. Besides, as international students, they were extremely sensitive about their performance from the eyes of the students of other countries. This strong cultural identity did not allow them to ask any question that might reveal their ignorance or deficiency on the learning material. Apart from the value of the question, they also paid excessive attention to whether their question would contribute to the learning of the rest of the class. According to the participants' standards, if their questions were too simple, or only related to their own interests, they might be viewed as inconsiderate since they wasted the time of the whole class. These standards also to some extent influenced the participants' attributes to the questions asked by their classmates. They believed some of the questions were so straightforward that needed to be reconsidered, or could be saved after the class by their standards. However, in most cases, the participants were quite tolerant of others' questions and appreciated the merit of student question.

Once the participants overcame the mental barrier to questioning their teachers and coming up with a high quality question, the next and last challenge they encountered was to express their question clearly and accurately, in English. When the participants were going to ask a question, they would make a quick evaluation on their English ability to decide if they could state the question in English. Similar to their concern on the value of question, they didn't want to be looked down by their classmates because of their poor English ability. Once they found it difficult to ask the questions clearly, they would typically give up the idea and might ask the professor individually after class in order to avoid the public embarrassment due to their awkward expression. In this sense,

as non-native English speakers, the participants just used silence as a protection. Besides, the participants also reported that they needed more time to consider the appropriate English translation. This translation process, unfortunately, again delayed their response to the lecture and when they finally found the accurate translation, they also lost the turn to ask the question. When more American students were present in the classroom, this language anxiety became more obvious and these participants would speak less to prevent direct contrast with these American peers. Nevertheless, it was found that English was the least serious problem associated with asking questions and would be solved fast.

The Chinese concepts of speaking and thinking were also found to impact the participants' question-asking behavior. In the American classroom, students' oral communication, including discussing, arguing, and asking question, was highly valued as the indication of their attention and thinking. In Chinese culture, however, the process of thinking was not necessarily accompanied with speaking. Chinese students were encouraged to show modesty in front of others and were not expected to boast their achievement in public. Therefore, they tended to not express their ideas flippantly even they were confident on the topic or had some insightful opinions on the learning materials. This concept on the relationship between speaking and thinking could be best illustrated by a Chinese phrase: *Speech is silver, silence is gold*. Although being silent and asking no unnecessary question was viewed as a virtue in Chinese schools, they might lead to opposite consequences as the cultural contexts had changed. In addition, all the participants stated that thinking was of primary significance in their learning.

Generally, they believed that they could benefit more from solving the problem by themselves after further reading, reviewing, and thinking. They also agreed that they benefited a lot form their classmates' questions and comments, which often encouraged and inspired their deeper thinking. That's why the participants highly appreciated the merit of student participation and question-asking, though they might not always be involved in this process personally.

Finally, the influences of classroom environment on the participants' question-asking behavior were the result of the classroom behavior of the American professors, as well as the question-asking behavior of other students. As we have discussed above, the close and intimate teacher-student relationship in the American classmates created a relatively relaxing and comfortable environment for the participants to express their ideas and ask questions freely. Besides, the American professors were enthusiastic to apply diverse teaching strategies to mobilize the classroom atmosphere. Therefore, the participants were encouraged by the professors' passion and were more willing to participate. The other factor related to the classroom environment was the participation of their peers in the classroom. It was noticeable that the Chinese students were often silenced by the stereotyped assumptions of the American professors and classmates that they were passive or reluctant in personality. In that case, the American students tended to dominate the classroom participation while leaving little chance to the Chinese students. The situation would be exacerbated if the American professor failed to realize this unbalanced power distribution. Generally, the presence of a diverse student population had positive influence on the participants' feelings about asking question as

well as their question-asking behavior. Specifically, the participants preferred a classroom with fewer students but with higher percentage of international students. Under this environment, they typically felt more comfortable and less pressured to speak.

In the next chapter, a brief summary of this study would be presented, followed by a conclusion. Recommendations for incoming Chinese students and American institutions and professors were offered. Finally, suggestions for future studies were also provided.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Overview of the study

Most international students have undergone a long preparation and decision-making process before coming to the United States to study. After all, considering the challenge of pursuing a college level degree in a foreign country, along with the consumed time and money, international students in the United States were usually among the most motivated students in their home countries. Despite the fact that they were determined and prepared before departure, many international students entered America without being fully aware of the demands and challenges they were going to encounter. The new educational environment, which was imbued with the cultural traditions of the country, placed distinct expectations and requirements from their old ones. Many scholars have addressed the international students' adaptation experiences from various perspectives and proposed many valuable suggestions for them to achieve a smooth transition. The literature review indicated that international students' abroad learning experiences were mainly influenced by their language ability, cultural backgrounds, and previous educational experiences.

As the single largest international student group in the American higher education system, Chinese students' learning experience has gained increasing attention in the past decades. In contrast to the cultural values of America, Chinese people valued social hierarchy, conformity to the group, group harmony, and consideration for others

(Cortazzi and Jin, 1996; Hofstede, 2001). Similarly, Chinese education valued the ultimate authority of the teacher and emphasized the student's acquisition of essential knowledge and passing rate in the examination. This produced Chinese learners who were more likely to accept the knowledge delivered by the teacher than challenging or questioning their teachers' ideas. This silence of Chinese students left the American educators the impression that they were passive and reluctant. It was easy to conclude that these students, as ESL learners, were silent in the class because of their poor English skills. However, students' attitudes and habits of asking questions were beyond the pure linguistic domain, but inherently grounded into their cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences, which should be investigated from multiple perspectives.

This research focused on five Chinese graduate students' learning experiences in an American university in terms of their attitudes and feelings about asking questions. The purpose of this study was to: 1) describe and interpret the general characteristics of these participants' question-asking behavior; and 2) identify the factors that accounted for their habits and feelings about asking questions. A qualitative case study was used and individual face-to-face interviews were conducted to capture participants' feelings and experiences from their own perspectives.

A primary advantage of this qualitative study was to give participants maximum freedom to reflect on their question-asking behavior with least interfere from the investigator. During the interviews, the participants shared their learning experiences in both China and America, with a focus on their experiences and attitudes towards asking questions in the classroom. They also shared their feelings about questions asked by

their classmates in both Chinese and American schools. Apart from the English problem, the influences of Chinese culture and educational environment were identified by the participants as major reasons for their hesitation to ask question in the classroom. These findings were consistent with prior research and served as the major themes in data analysis. However, the investigator was alert to any new factors that arose from the interviews.

This study contributed to the overall literature on the learning experience of Chinese students in the United States. In particular, this study focused on their question-asking experiences in the American classroom, which is an underexplored domain. The investigator believed that this topic was of particular importance as it was a thorough reflection of the three major challenges encountered by most Chinese international students: English language problems, cultural conflicts, and differences in educational environment and teaching and learning styles between China and America. Most of the themes identified in the present study that affected participants' question-asking behavior were discussed by previous researchers. The uniqueness of this study, however, was to concentrate on a specific problem with these theoretical findings. As such, the investigator could provide a thorough examination of the current issue.

Summary of the results

From the interviews, it was found that asking question was not among the participants' major learning strategies. Besides, the participants typically were very cautious about their questions, due to the uncertainty of their oral English skill and unfamiliarity with the learning materials. Therefore, instead of asking question directly

in the class, the participants preferred to ask the professor for help after class in a private way. The study findings were then presented around the three themes identified from the literature review and data analysis.

English deficiency was identified by the participants as the foremost factor that influenced their motivation to ask questions spontaneously in class. Compared with the fluent native English speakers, mainly American students, these participants were inferior in the English ability. This sharp contrast often made them unwilling to speak up in the class: they worried that the professor or other students would laugh at them due to their awkward expression. Therefore, when they were not confident of their English expression, they would just withhold the question and wait until the class was over. It was also found that the participants needed more time to come up with the question and translate it into English clearly and accurately. This mediation and translation process, however, cost them too much time to catch the turn. As a result, they had no choice but to be silent.

The participants' habits and beliefs about asking questions were also influenced by the cultural tradition of China, which was summarized under Hofstede's (2001) five-dimensional model of cultural differences. Chinese culture was characterized by large power distance, moderate uncertainty avoidance, high collectivism, femininity, and long-term orientation according to Hofstede (2001). One manifestation of large power distance in Chinese school is the hierarchical teacher-student relationship. Chinese students were in awe of their teacher as a result of this unequal position between teacher and student. Another issue influenced by the power distance was the level of question.

The participants worried that their question was too simple to be asked and usually withheld the low-level questions. The certainty-seeking inclination of Chinese students was reflected in their preference on well-organized lectures over the two-way communication with extensive student participation. Chinese students were used to viewing the teacher as the authority and reliable source of knowledge. Interrupting the professor and asking question, by their standards, broke the class organization. The influences of the collective characteristics of Chinese culture were reflected on the participants' conformity to the collective group norms. During their previous educational experiences, asking questions was rare among their classmates. As a result, they would save their question out of the consideration of group harmony. However, it was also found that this tendency to conform to the group also promoted the participants' motivation to ask questions when they observed that asking questions was normal in the American classroom. The femininity of Chinese culture made the Chinese students highly sensitive to the needs of others. They typically worried that their personal question would interrupt others' learning and waste the class time. The long-term orientation of Chinese culture was not found any direct influence on the participants' question-asking behavior.

In addition to the language problem and cultural traditions, the differences in educational environment and teaching and learning styles between China and America also influenced the participants' experiences and feelings about asking questions. These differences were investigated under the Confucian-Socratic framework proposed by Tweed and Lehman (2002). Four issues were identified that had direct impacts on the

participants' question-asking behavior: the teacher-student relationship, the roles of teacher, learning strategies, and purpose of learning. Confucian-oriented education valued students' respect to the teacher as the authority. Therefore, Chinese students were not encouraged to question the expertise of their teacher in the class and any doubt from the students would be viewed as a threat to the teachers' respected status. As indicated above, Chinese students expected to receive a highly organized lecture from the teacher. This was consistent with the established image of Chinese teacher as the transmitter of knowledge. Therefore, teachers were expected to dominate the whole teaching and learning process whereas left students less opportunity to ask questions. In Chinese education, learning is more about understanding by personal effort rather than bothering the teacher with constant questions. In concordance with the expectation of teachers, Chinese students were used to listening to the lecture attentively and taking notes quietly. As a result, the participants would rather solve the problems individually than ask the teacher for help immediately in class. Finally, the purpose of learning also influenced the participants' attitudes towards asking questions. Traditionally, education in China was viewed as the necessary path to become national officials. This evolved into the examination-orientation of contemporary China's education. For Chinese teachers and students, passing the standard exams and getting into the key schools became the emergent purpose of the entire teaching and learning activities. Thus, for students, receiving and remembering the standard answers provided by the teachers was of more pragmatic importance than asking question.

When the Chinese international students entered the American classroom, usually the first thing they noticed was the communication pattern between teacher and student, which was different from that of China. This perceived distinction actually reflected the different expectations of teacher and student between China and America. In the American classroom, teachers were in a more intimate and closer relationship with their students and were willing to discuss with the students any academic issue in an equal position. In accordance with the image of teacher, American students were expected to actively participate in the class orally, including asking questions. This oral communication between teacher and students was highly valued by Western educators as a positive sign of students' thinking and understanding of the learning materials.

For Chinese students, however, this belief and expectation was foreign to them and contradicted their previous educational experiences. In a Chinese school, speaking up lightly in public, interrupting the ongoing lecture for questions, and questioning the teacher without prior understanding are all regarded as bad manners of a student. This correlation between speaking and thinking was foreign to these Chinese students who were committed to the belief that the quality of what was said outweighed the quantity and frequency of one's speaking. That's why the participants paid so much attention to the quality of their question and English expression. On the surface, they didn't always orally participate in the class or ask question; but they were never absent mentally.

In addition, as international students, they were extremely sensitive to their image in the eyes of the American professor and other classmates. Unfortunately, as international students, they suffered the double difficulty from both language deficiency

and unfamiliarity with the American educational environment. The contrast to their American peers kept reminding them the inferior status they were in and forbade them revealing any disadvantage in front of "others" in the classroom. The situation was exacerbated by the stereotyped assumption held by many Americans that Chinese students were inherently silent. As a result, American professors and students often ignored the Chinese students' willingness to participate more and silenced their voice unconsciously. Nevertheless, in general, the diverse student composition in the American school, along with the relaxing classroom environment, made it easier for the participants to participate in the class activities and ask questions. Specifically, the participants were more likely to ask question when there were more international students present.

In sum, after spending several semesters in the United States, the participants had gradually accepted the fact that asking questions was a norm in the American classroom and had a clearer recognition on their academic competence and English proficiency. As a result, they were realistic in setting the goals for their classroom performance and selecting the strategies to cope with the expectation of the American professors on their participation. For example, when they were in China, they wouldn't ask even if they had a question; but now, they would first quickly evaluate the question and decide if they could state the problem clearly in English. Besides, the diverse and relaxing classroom atmosphere also enabled them to behave freely with less hesitation: they were encouraged to participate and ask questions; but if they didn't, that would be all right, too.

In other words, they typically employed a reflective and negotiating way to cope with the expectation of the American school. On one hand, they found many of their previous learning strategies still applied to the new learning environment of the United States. As we have noticed, listening to the lecture, taking notes, and reviewing after class still summarized most of their learning experiences in America. On the other hand, they observed that their classmates participating in the class actively and asking question frequently. They felt a need to adjust to the modes of the American classroom and be part of the community. So they imitated the classroom behavior of the American students and were more active in classroom participation in terms of asking questions.

Conclusion

Looking back at the whole study process, I stared with literature review on Chinese students' learning experiences in America and in particular, their question-asking behavior. This helped me to set the research objectives and research questions. Before recruiting participants and conducting the interviews, I created an interview protocol as a general guidance for data collection. These questions were based on previous findings and my personal experiences as an international student in the United States.

When I came to the United States, I have observed that many Chinese students, including myself, have experienced challenges as we adjust to the American learning environment and culture. My experience has shown me that the problem of asking question could arise from the English language problem, but might also arise from the unfamiliarity of the American culture and educational environment. I also noticed that

many American professors were unaware of the different cultural backgrounds and educational experiences these Chinese students brought to the American classrooms. That's why I chose this issue as my thesis research.

Although the research results are seemingly in accordance with the established impression that Chinese students are silent in the classroom and are reluctant to ask questions voluntarily, I don't agree with the conclusion that Chinese students are "passive listeners" or "inactive learners", as the Western educators suggested.

First, they did ask questions. During the interviews, the participants reported that they were more active in asking questions in the U.S. than they were in China. This change of behavior was partly due to the open classroom environment featured as the equal teacher-student relationship and the relaxing atmosphere. Besides, the participants were also motivated by their active classmates who kept asking question during the class. Admittedly, they still preferred to ask the professor for help individually after class for various reasons, such as shyness, language problem, and time limit.

More importantly, although they didn't ask question as frequently as the American students did, it did not necessarily mean that they were "passive listeners" or "inactive learners". It was revealed that they have been listening to the lecture attentively, thinking about the learning materials actively, and paying attention to the questions asked by their classmates carefully. It was just their learning preference to save the question until the end of the class or solve the problem individually first before seeking help from the professor. It's arbitrary to discard a certain type of learning style that was not consistent with the American norms as "passive" or "wrong".

Originally, I planned to ask for the participants' strategies to overcome this "difficulty" of not asking questions. However, I soon realized that the participants typically didn't think this was a problem. As indicated above, asking questions was never among their major learning strategies and they did ask more once they realized that asking questions was a desirable classroom behavior in the American university. For the participants, they tended to view it as a must-have experience in their learning abroad and developed their own ways to handle it. Arguably, the participants could make the effort to improve their oral English skill, know more about the American communication rules, and get familiar with the teaching and learning styles of America. All these efforts would help them to alleviate their learning experiences and adjust to the American educational environment smoothly. However, is it really necessary for these Chinese students to follow exactly The American way to be academically successful?

For the Chinese students, the problem was not whether they could achieve academically in the United States. Previous studies had indicated that they were successful in academic performances as well as in career development. The question is how could American institutions and professor facilitate the success of their Chinese international students and make their learning experiences in the United States less stressful. In addition, when the classrooms are becoming culturally diverse, it is important for the educators and educational researchers to hear the voices of these students and understand their needs in order to create a democratic and diverse school culture. It was found that these participants often struggled between those highly honored Chinese virtues, such as respect for authority, caution, and modesty, and the

American values of spirit of doubt, talkativeness, and aggressiveness. As a result, most of them adopted a negotiating position: they tried to maintain their Chinese values while imitating the classroom behavior of their American classmates and absorbing the helpful skills in order to survive in the American schools. For the participants, this was a realistic choice.

Much previous research on international students at least suggested that they should adjust their values and styles to the ones of the host countries in order to be academically successful (Golz, 2008; Grimshaw, 2007), while few focused on the effort institutions could make to accommodate these international students. Ladd and Ruby (1999) called for differentiating acculturation from assimilation: instead of forcing the international students to abandon their cultures and learning habits, American institutions should respect the learning style of these international students and assist them to adjust to the American educational environment. For American educators, it would be more helpful to recognize the diversity in terms of culture and learning preference than imposing all international students the American way.

From the big perspective, this study was a comparison of educational philosophies and academic cultures on the specific issue of asking questions between China and the United States. This study, along with many others, demonstrated that Chinese international students had their unique needs and learning preferences. It was not the investigator's intention to conclude which one is better than the other. In fact, many educational scholars, both Chinese and Americans, have been working on appreciating and merging the advantages of both sides to create a better educational

environment for all students. The merit of this study, therefore, was to promote the mutual understanding of people from different cultural backgrounds and traditions and help people to recognize the achievement of each other. Since cultural pluralism became the accepted norm of the society, institutions and faculty members have to increase their multicultural awareness, adjust their assumptions and stances, and modify their teaching strategies to work more effectively with these international students.

This study was meant to be of interest to a wide range of readers, including staffs and faculty members in American institutions, incoming Chinese students, and educational scholars interested in this area. In the next section, recommendations and suggestions, based on the research findings, would be provided.

Recommendations

The research results had yielded several recommendations for American institutions, faculty members, and the incoming Chinese students. Most of these recommendations were the voices of the participants. It should be noticed that the investigator never suggested that these recommendations could apply to any student or professor in any other American institution. In a qualitative study, generalization was not the primary concern of the investigator. This part was only a summarization of common issues identified by the participants during the interviews. However, the readers, especially those Chinese students and American professors who were concerned about this issue, could make their own decision on how these recommendations applied to their own experiences.

Recommendations for American institutions

International student services and office of graduate studies at the institutions could play essential role in facilitating international students adjustment to the American educational environment and academic culture. On the institution level, an effective training and support system is essential. It should include training for both international students and faculty members. Besides, specific orientations to the American educational environment and academic culture, including the background preparation of the graduate study, should be provided for all international graduate students.

During the interviews, all the participants appreciated the assistance provided by these university departments that were related to international students and graduate students. They mentioned the workshops and lectures offered by these organizations were very helpful during their transition process. However, as Cindy said, most of the workshops or seminars provided by the institution focused on the general issue such as paper writing and job hunting, which was not culture specific. She suggested that the international student orientations could provide seminars and lectures on the expectations of American professors and the modes of American-style teaching. These were the focus of many international Chinese students; however, they had limited access to this information from the university.

Mike also suggested that he expected to gain insights and orientation to the American academic culture and communicative norms. For example, as an international student, he wanted to know how to communicate effectively with the American people, such as his professor and advisor. Therefore, it was suggested that the institution could

provide opportunities for international students to interact with local American students and residents, or organize parties between international students and professors to increase their awareness on the American communicative patterns.

Workshops or seminars could also be held oriented to American professors and staffs who work with international students. Information could include the cultural traditions and educational environment of students of various origins of country. This knowledge on the educational experiences and cultural background could help the professors to reduce their misunderstandings of their international students' certain learning styles and methods.

Recommendations for American professors

Unsurprisingly, the participants gave most recommendations for the American professor, as I summarized below. This was probably because Chinese students had very high expectations of their professors and hoped the professor would initiate the change. Unfortunately, most American instructors failed to recognize these high expectations from their international students and made little accommodation (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005; Trice, 2003). This was evidenced by the participants' complex feelings about their American professors. On one hand, they really appreciated the passion and friendliness displayed by their American professors. One the other hand, they expected the professors could be more organized on their lecture and pay more attention on the Chinese students.

Sharon thought some of her professors failed to address the unique needs of international students. She used one of her courses as an example: "I think the professors

should show their sensitiveness to the cultural diversity, especially when international students are present. In one of my culture-related courses, although there were many international students in the class, the professor didn't effectively design the teaching plan to display the cultural diversity among students." She suggested that American professors should provide more chance for international students to express their ideas and let them know their presence was been aware of.

Cindy also thought the American professors should pay more attention on the international students. She explained: "The graduate education in the United States is highly internationalized; but this 'equal treatment' isn't always desirable. Due to the language deficiency and cultural differences, international students would inevitably face more challenges than the American students, even working on the same task. Admittedly it is hard to address every student' need in the class. But at least, you could show your attention in some ways after class."

It was found that the participants were more comfortable to seek help from the professor individually after class. Therefore, that would be helpful if the professors could initiate to provide help after class in an informal way. This would also help to establish a rapport between teacher and students, which was highly valued by the Chinese students. As suggested by Nancy: "If the professors could develop an intimate relationship with us after class, we would be more active in the class." Therefore, in addition to keep encouraging Chinese students to raise question in class, professors might also spend more time meeting those students after class.

Another problem that bothered the participants was that it usually cost them more time to come up with the questions and consider the appropriate English translation. The participants reported that sometimes the professor didn't wait enough long for the students to ask the question. As a result, the offer to ask questions just became an insincere routine in the eyes of the participants. So, it was suggested that the professors could enhance their wait time to give the Chinese students enough time to prepare their questions.

Another strategy that would encourage the Chinese students' motivation to ask question was to assign the question before the class meeting. Mike, Sharon, and Cindy all mentioned that they would prefer to be told prior to the lecture that they were expected to ask questions. For the participants, they were reluctant to share the idea that was immature by their standards if they didn't have the chance to think it over in advance. A suggestion is that, the professor could assign the question, along with the homework or reading assignment, by the end of each lecture and state clearly that he or she was expecting some questions next class. In this way, the students could think about the questions ahead of time and have time to organize the thoughts and translation thoroughly. This would help them to overcome the worry on the negative consequence of their low level question and increase their motivation to participate.

Most of the time, the Chinese students were silent in the classroom due to their beliefs of good classroom behavior and established learning styles. However, what was usually ignored was the possibility that they were silenced by their American professors and classmates. As Cindy and Randy noticed, many Chinese students had realized the

importance of speaking up in the classroom and were willing to ask more questions. However, the American students were usually dominating the "power of speaking" and the American professors were often accepting the stereotyped assumption that all Chinese students were silent and passive in class. The teacher's acceptance of Chinese students' silence might in turn deprive the opportunity to ask question of these students who might have realized the importance of classroom participation and asking questions. Moreover, since the Chinese students were non-native English speakers, their voices would be harder to hear. Therefore, American professors should be aware of the unequal power distribution in the classroom and intentionally give Chinese students more chance to speak and participate.

Above all, a mutual understanding between American professor and international Chinese students should be achieved in order to construct a supportive and comfortable learning environment. It is important for American professors to realize that adapting to a new academic environment would be very stressful and painful. For many international students, the transition process was both physically and psychologically demanding, as they had to force themselves to give up their accustomed learning habits and accept the American norms. Instead of complaining the "atypical" behavior of these students, professors should recognize the human difference in terms of learning and adjust their teaching methods to maximize the achievement of all students.

Recommendations for incoming Chinese students

As I stated earlier, the participants typically didn't view not asking question as a serious threat to their study in the United States. Therefore, their recommendations for

the future international Chinese students were mostly general suggestions around English skills and positive attitude.

The first recommendation from the participants was feeling free to speak about your concerns and ask questions. All the participants said that the equal and intimate relationship between teacher and student in America enabled them to talk with their professors more comfortably on their troubles and needs. Therefore, they suggested that incoming Chinese students should feel free to contact with their advisors or professors on any issue they encountered in their study or life. Besides, it would be also important for the incoming students to recognize that it is all right to speak about your needs and ask the professor to change. For example, Mike said one of his professors spoke very fast at the beginning of the semester. He, along with some other international students, pointed this out during the first Q&A session and asked the professor to slow down. The whole process turned out to be, in his word, "surprisingly smooth".

The second suggestion to the incoming Chinese students was that English would not be a problem. As we have noticed in the discussion part, although English deficiency was identified as a major problem faced by the participants, they all agreed that this was the least significant one compared with other concerns. Besides, they were all realistic on the expectations on their English performance. Once they overcame other concerns and were determined to ask a question, they wouldn't be over-sensitive on the unimportant flaws in their expression. Cindy explained: "…after all, as a foreigner, you aren't able to speak as good as the native speakers. It took some time to adjust. You have to face it with a positive attitude but don't have to take it too seriously."

Randy suggested the incoming student should not worry too much about the quality of their question, either. He said: “I can understand that people have that concern (on the simple question), so did I in the first year. But basically nobody would laugh at you. So just ask when you don’t understand because understanding will always be your primary goal. Mike also said that the value of question should not be a problem: “what mattered was you got to know what you wanted to know.”

The final suggestion was to make active adjustment and become a flexible learner. One of the best strategies was observing and imitating the American students’ classroom behavior and learning methods. All the participants found that this open attitude helped them a lot to modify their own learning styles and adjust to the American educational environment. Getting involved with the local students was also an effective strategy. Nancy said that she hung around a lot with several American friends she met from different situations. Hanging around with these American friends not only improved her oral English, but also enabled her to observe the learning behavior and strategies used by these American students. Randy also suggested that international students should interact with the American people to be familiar with their ways of thinking and learning.

Suggestions for future study

The findings of this study revealed how language ability, cultural differences, and differences in educational environment could influence participants’ attitudes and feelings about asking questions in graduate level classes in an American university. A qualitative method was used to describe and analyze participants’ feelings and

experiences from their own perspectives. Concerning the focus and design of this study, further cross-cultural research may examine this issue from other standpoints to enrich the literature.

First of all, it was found that the participants preferred to ask the professor question after class. Since asking question was believed to be a sign of effective learning by Western educators, future study might focus on this informal interpersonal interaction between teacher and students to investigate its potential on increasing student participation. For example, professors could conduct action research in their own classrooms through increasing out-of-class interaction with those Chinese students who kept silent in the classroom and observing whether they would be more participative with respect to the frequency of asking question as a result.

Second, it was revealed that classroom atmosphere in terms of class size and student population had significant effects on the participants' motivation and opportunity to ask questions. Therefore, it was suggested that further research could explore the role of effective classroom designation on promoting students' classroom participation. For example, interested researchers could conduct field study to see if the Chinese students would be more participative when they were grouped with other international students rather than American students. Classroom observation could also be made in accompany to interviews to evaluate the participants' frequency of question-asking in classrooms with various percentages of American international students and international students.

Third, "silence" and "passiveness" was not unique to Chinese students but found among students from other East Asian countries or Confucian-heritage societies, for

example, Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong. Researchers, then, could investigate the same problem on students from these regions. These students shared with the Chinese students a similar cultural background, and they were also ESL learners. The difference is their different educational environment in terms of academic culture, teaching and learning styles, and examination system. The interested researchers would examine the extent to which specific educational environment, rather than the shared cultural traditions, have impacts on the individual's habits and feelings about asking questions.

Fourth, the study investigated the Chinese students' perceptions and reflections about asking questions from their own perspectives. Interviews with the participating students were the major data collection instruments. The silence of Chinese students was more a concern of the American professors than one of the students, as found in this study. Further study is suggested to explore the same issue from the perspectives of American professors, focusing on their perceptions and suggestions. It would also be insightful to hear the voices of faculty members who were international students themselves in the United States. Being as international students themselves, they might provide different perspectives about the "silence" and "reluctance" displayed by these Chinese students.

Finally, this study focused on the question-asking behavior of Chinese international students who were pursuing a graduate degree in the United States. It was the investigator's belief that these graduate students' previous educational experiences in China had significant influences on their feelings and attitudes towards asking questions. A similar study could be expanded to Chinese undergraduate students in the American

institutions to diversify this area, since their educational environment has been changed significantly as a result of China's ongoing educational reform. It would also be interesting to study the Chinese graduate students who finished their undergraduate study in the United States to see the effects of American college education on their question-asking behavior.

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APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANTS RECRUIT LETTER

Dear student name,

My name is Yiting Chu. I would like to invite your participation in my study which I am conducting at the Texas A&M University as part of my master thesis. This study is to investigate the learning experiences of Chinese international students in the American universities during their graduate study. The purpose of the interview is to understand your learning experience and related challenges in the American university so that I could better address your concerns and needs. The interview would take about 45-60 minutes and your response would be audio taped with your approval. The recorded files and data would be then kept in a password protected computer to which only the investigator has the access. All the files will be destroyed until they are no longer needed. Your response in the interview is confidential and no identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any report that might be published.

Participation in this research is absolutely voluntary and will not affect your grades or status at Texas A&M University. You have the right to refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer and you can withdraw from the study at any time. There is no compensation or other form of direct benefit to your participation in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this research or participation, please contact me at (979)422-2577.

Thank you for your time and assistance in this study.

Sincerely,

Yiting Chu

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background Questions

1. Please introduce yourself, you name, major, and degree level.

2. How long have you been in the United States? Do you enjoy your life here?

3. What's your major in college? How do you think your undergraduate study in China?

4. What is your general feeling of the culture and academic environment in the United States?

5. Do you have any questions concerning this research or interview?

Differences between American and Chinese Cultures

1. Did you have any previous academic or personal experience that prepared your understanding of the American culture?

2. What cultural differences between the America and China have you encountered during your studies in the United States?

3. Does the different cultural environment have impacts on your life and study?

4. What role do American classmates and professors play in your understanding of American culture?

Academic Culture

1. Generally, did you find many differences between the Chinese and American college studies? Discuss the academic differences you have experienced in the American university.

2. Did you find any differences on the teaching and learning styles between China and United States? If so, please specify and give some examples.

----Perceived roles and teaching styles of professor

----Learning strategies of students

----Students' classroom behavior

----Class activities and interaction

3. Have you experienced any academic difficulties or challenges since you came here? Possible issues include: classroom participation, asking question, interaction with classmates and professors, etc.

Previous Educational Experience

Based on your educational experience in China,

--- What is the major form of your classes, one-direction lecture or two-way interaction? What are the general procedures of your class?

---Did your teachers expect students to ask questions? If so, did you ask questions frequently?

---Only given the "No" answer of the last question, why didn't you ask questions in class?

---Did you classmates ask questions frequently? If so, how did you feel when they asked questions in class?

Question-asking Behavior

According to your educational experience in the United States

1. Do you think asking question is a necessary and effective learning strategy in your graduate study? Please defend your answer.

2. What is the major form of your classes, one-direction lecture or two-way interaction? What are the general procedures of your class?

3. Do your professors expect or encourage students to raise questions in the class? If so, do you ask questions frequently?

4. Do your American classmates ask question frequently? If so, how do you feel when they ask questions in class?

5. What conditions or difficulties (cultural differences, language ability, or learning habits) do you believe that had impacts on your question-asking behavior answered in last question?

In terms of the specified conditions, the following questions will be asked.

Cultural differences

---What cultural issues do you think accounted for your question-asking behavior? How did these cultural issues influence your question-asking behavior?

---What strategies did you use to handle with the cultural differences?

Language Ability

---Do you feel language barriers in your daily communication or academic study? What is your TOEFL or IELTS score by the admission? (This is an optional question for the interviewees) Do you think your English test score really reflects your American proficiency? Please explain it.

---Do you think language deficiency had major influences on your question-asking behavior? Please provide examples to indicate how language deficiency influenced your question-asking behavior.

---What strategies did you adopt to improve your English ability?

Educational environment

---Are you doing well in your field of study? How do you feel about your academic performance compared with your American classmates and international students from other countries?

---Do you think your question-asking behavior is influenced by your previous educational experience in China? If so, please give some examples.

---Do you think your question-asking behavior have influence on your current academic performance?

---Did you try to make changes to your learning strategies?

6. Besides the issues covered above, what other perspectives of your life contribute to your question-asking behavior? Please explain with some detailed examples.

Recommendation

1. What recommendations do you have for Chinese students who are going to pursue graduate study in the United States? What preparation do they need before departure?

2. What recommendations do you have for American professors who are teaching international students, especially Chinese students? For example, teaching styles, class organization, and academic assistance?

4. What recommendations do you have for American institution administrators in order to better facilitate these Chinese students? For example, orientation program, academic and cultural workshop?

5. Are there any additional questions that you recommend that I should ask next participant?

6. Is there anything that you would like to add or comment on the research?

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
The Question-asking Behavior of Five Chinese International Students: A Case Study

Introduction
The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research study aimed to describing and interpreting the learning behavior of Chinese international graduate students in Texas A&M University in adapting to the American higher education system. The purpose of this study is to explore the general characteristics of Chinese international graduate students' questioning behavior in the American universities and investigate the major issues accounting for such behavior. You were selected to be a possible participant because you are from Mainland China and currently enrolling in one graduate program at Texas A&M University.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to make an individual face-to-face interview with the investigator. During the interview, you will be asked to describe your past educational experience in China in terms of questioning behavior. Then you will be asked a series of questions pertaining to your current learning experience at Texas A&M University with a focus on questioning behavior in classroom. At last, you are requested to offer some advice and suggestions for upcoming Chinese students and American professors to facilitate the learning experience of Chinese international students in United States. This study will take 45-60 minutes.

Your participation will be audio recorded.

What are the risks involved in this study?
The risks associated with this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

What are the possible benefits of this study?
You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, this study might inform the further understanding of the learning behavior and difficulties of Chinese international graduate students experienced during their adaptation process. Not only would the future successors benefit from the results of this study, but the educational professionals in the United States could have a better awareness of the status quo of learning experience of Chinese students in the America.

Do I have to participate?

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University being affected.

Who will know about my participation in this research study?
This study is confidential, and all the recordings (both written and taped) would be kept in private and securely stored by the investigator after the data collection. Any recordings will be kept only during the research and then erased. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published.

If you choose to participate in this study, you may choose to be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the investigator will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept by the study is finished.

Whom do I contact with questions about the research?
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Yiting Chu at 9794222577 or phoebus_chu@tamu.edu.

Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?
This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact these offices at (979)458-4067 or irb@tamu.edu.

Signature
Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.
_____ I agree to be audio recorded.
_____ I do not want to be audio recorded.

Signature of Participant: _____**Date:** _____

Printed Name: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____ **Date:** _____

Printed Name: _____

VITA

Name: Yiting Chu

Address: Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture
College of Education and Human Development
Texas A&M University
4232 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-4232

Email Address: phoebus_chu@tamu.edu

Education: B.A., Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, Hubei University of Technology, 2009
M.S., Curriculum and Instruction, Texas A&M University, 2012